"Sea Snow Comes High" — GORDON KEYNE

"Hunch-drunk Sheriffin'" — S. OMAR BARKER

Short Stories

May 25th

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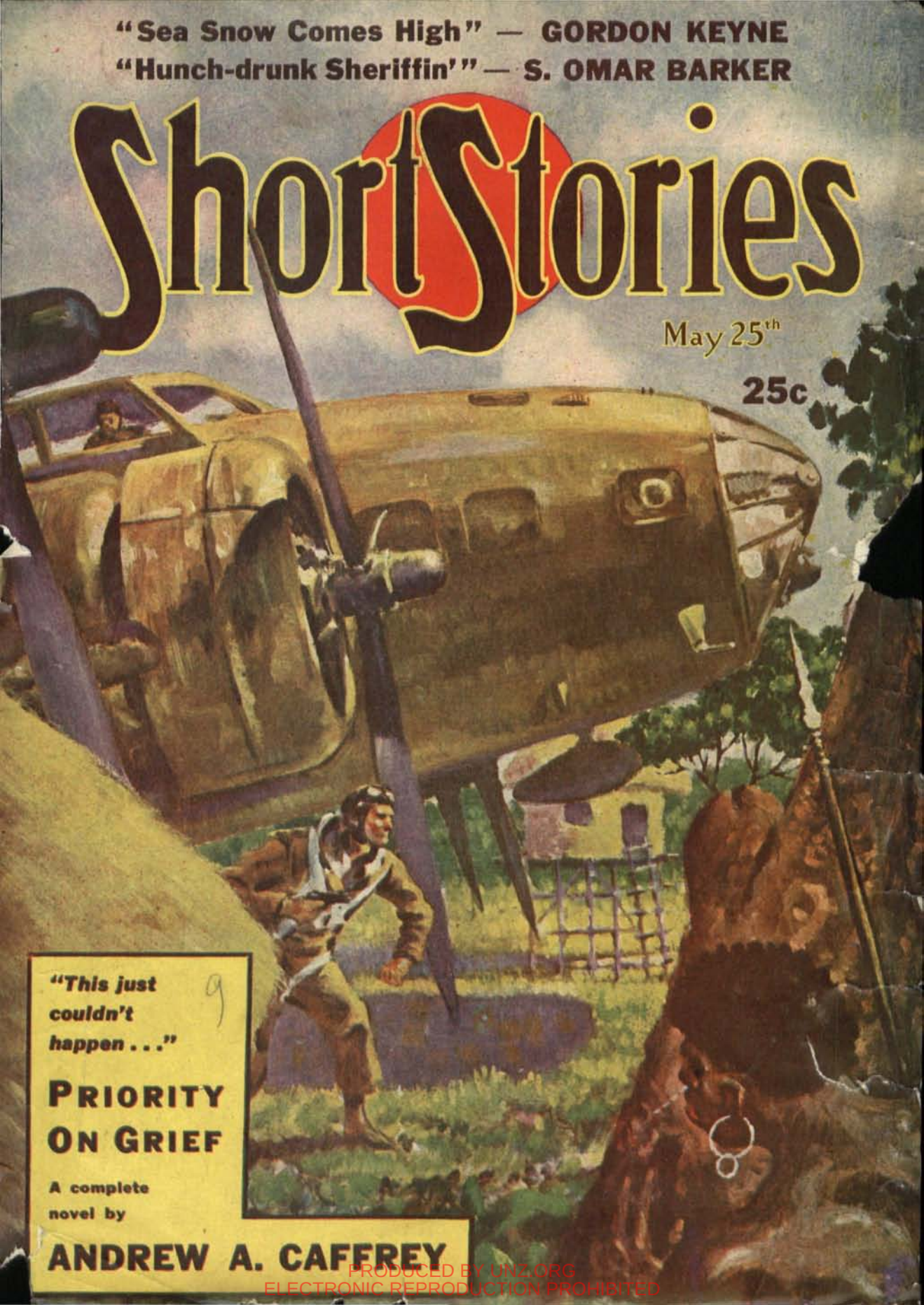

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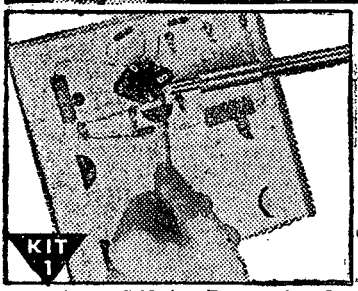

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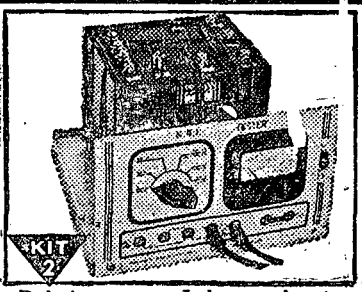

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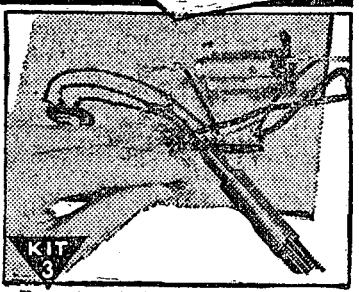

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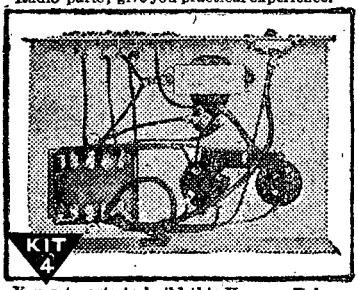

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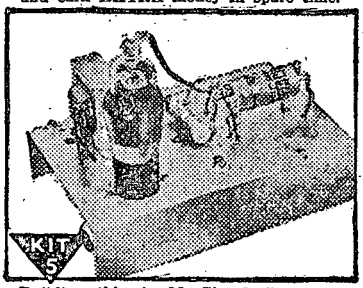

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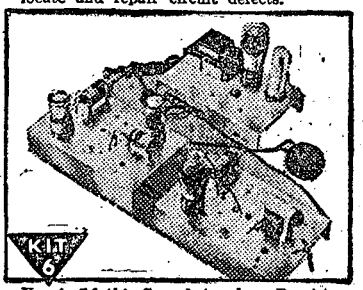

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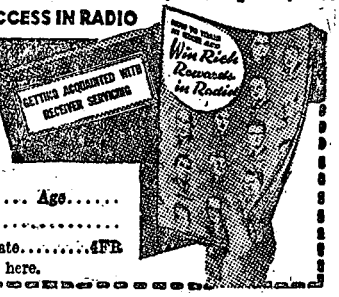

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(A Complete Novel) **Andrew A. Caffrey** **6**

Cadet Paul Bradshaw Wanted More Air Hours to Get His Wings; He Didn't Realize They Were to Be Spent Over Hell Itself

HUNCH-DRUNK SHERIFFIN' **S. Omar Barker** **32**

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Occasionally a Character Has Bucked a Sure Thing Sucker Trap and Busted the Bank Wide Open

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EDITOR
D. McILWRAITH

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
LAMONT BUCHANAN

May 25th, 1946

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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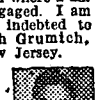

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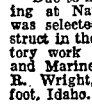

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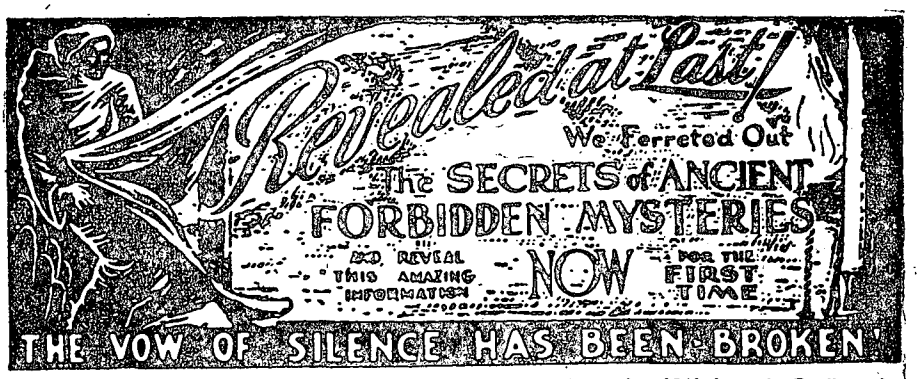

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The Two Gents Had G-2 Stenciled All Over Them. What Could They Want with an Air Cadet?

PRIORITY ON GRIEF

By ANDREW A. CAFFREY

I

WHEN Cadet Paul Bradshaw quit quarters and started for the ready apron and the waiting training planes thereon he hoped that at least one half hour of air work would be his. That is, he expected to get his usual forenoon hop, and not a trip to North Africa. But a young feller in Air Corps, starting out in the jaunty, hopeful morning, could never be too sure what the eye-opening long Texas day might bring—not back there in 1941, with Europe already in the red, and Uncle Sam edging that way.

If everything went okay, and barring those nasty things that haunted a flying cadet's life, Paul Bradshaw should have been able to clean up his last few prelim hops, thus making himself vulnerable to the next ordeal in line—the basic course. It wasn't much to ask, and if the Fates would only lay off for a few air hours longer the Bradshaw boy was killing to bet his shirt—the Bradshaw boy was willing to bet his shirt—the occasion—that he'd clean up this bit of flying business and wing right ahead with the rest of the lusty loopin' lavas.

There was an ex-airlines two-engined job coming in at Air Transport Command's flight line when Cadet Paul Bradshaw came down the long apron toward his group's gathering point; and, in an offhand manner, the little voice deep within said, "It'd be nice to make a long hop in one of those big jobs, Cadet Bradshaw," but Cadet Bradshaw knew only too well that nice air jaunts such as the one suggested by the small inner voice were only for the big brass and the very fortunate civvies.

Hardly had Paul Bradshaw joined his group before a Personnel Office jeep jigged its way along the long line of waiting training planes. Captain Singer, a harmless fellow known as Simon Lagree, was aboard the jeep. As he came, Captain Simon Lagree Singer paged: "Cadet Bradshaw, Paul A. . . . Cadet Bradshaw, Paul A. . . . Cadet Bradshaw, Paul A."

A hundred cadets took up the chant, and they all seemed to be either gazing into the

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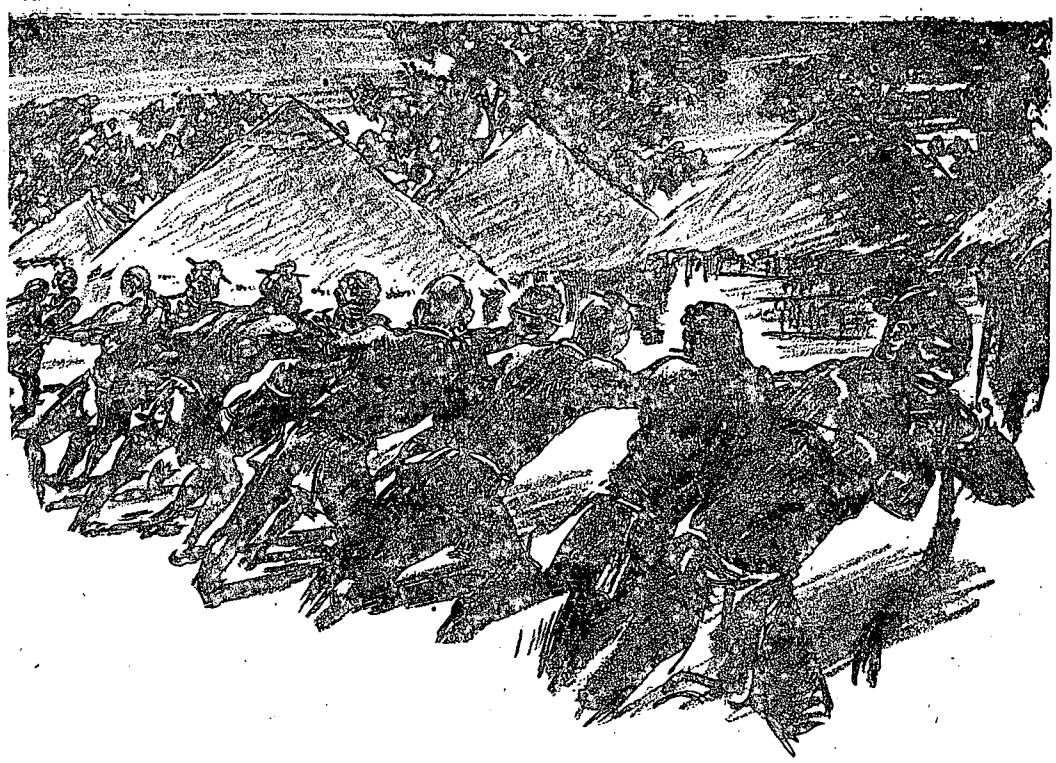

sky—in quest of Cadet Bradshaw, Paul A. —or staring at the cement apron. And no matter where they gazed or stared, they were being of absolutely no use to the captain from Personnel.

Finally, Cadet Bradshaw, Paul A. said, "If it's garbage, guard, K.P., or other fatig-gue, Captain Singer, he went that way. But if it's to receive a high honor, or date the general's blonde datter, I'm him. . . . Cheer, sir!"

"Climb aboard, cadet," Captain Singer invited, "and if you ask no questions, I'll tell you no lies."

Waving a haughty farewell, Cadet Bradshaw sang out, "I won't forget you poor young fellers when I get to Washington. I'll put in a kind word for you with the Chief of Air when he asks me what's what at Randolf. So take care of the air work, my fine men. Keep 'em flying."

"You might put in a good word for me too, Cadet Bradshaw," Captain Singer suggested.

"Eh, sir? Beg pardon, sir?" Paul Bradshaw stammered. "Might I ask what you mean, sir?"

"You'll be surprised," said Singer. "Well, here we are, cadet. There's a gentleman here in ATC operations who'd have a word with you. A Major Rand. He came all the way from Washington just to have a few words with you. If the word is just one—'Come,'—you'll do as invited, cadet. Let's go in."

MAJOR RAND, the man from Washington, was on his feet and obviously all ready to get going again, no doubt back to that same busy city. And sure enough, he had little more than "come" to say.

"Cadet Bradshaw, Paul A., Flight Training group?" he asked, and checked, just by way of accurate, no-damned-mistake identification.

"Yes, sir," the bewildered young Bradshaw answered.

"Good, cadet," Rand enthused. "Well, so long, Colonel Pierce," he said to the officer with whom he had been chatting. Then, to the cadet, "I have orders to bring you back to Washington with me. We have a transport waiting on the line. Let's go."

Now there's nothing in a flying cadet's life quite so disastrous as lost air time, so the cadet in young Bradshaw said, "But I'm due

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up, Major Rand, in a few minutes. You see, sir, I'm under the gun for a clean-up on my prelim class."

"That'll keep, cadet," Major Rand said, moving toward the door, but he gave no hint as to how long it might have to keep.

"Don't I get a chance to pack a bag, or pick up a few traveling articles—an extra shirt and the toothbrush, sir?" the cadet asked.

"No pick-ups, cadet," Rand said. "Not even a short good-bye phone call for the girl friend. Let's shake a leg."

"Just a moment, sir—am I being let out, or am I under arrest, or what?" Cadet Bradshaw demanded, knowing that there are times when a man in the army might just as well demand—especially when it begins to look as though he's being shanghaied.

"Not at all, Cadet Bradshaw," Major Rand said, and laughed. "You, for some reason, are wanted in Washington. These are strange, high-pressure times, young feller. Nowadays, as you must learn, the men way up there can put a hand on a boy's shoulder and say, 'We want you,' and they do, and you and I'd better. No matter what the outlook, the doubt in our mind, or the sound of the voice that gives the word."

"It shouldn't happen to a dog, Major," Cadet Bradshaw said, moving through the door which Rand held open for his fieldward passage. "Woe is me—a cadet! Why even the keep-off signs, on the lawns here in San Antonio, just say 'Dogs and Soldiers Keep Off the Grass.' *They* even ignore cadets. Cadets be damned!"

"Cheer up," Rand said. "It might not be as bad as you think. A good per cent of the men we G-2 agents bring in are never killed."

"You G-2? Army Intelligence?" the surprised cadet asked.

"That's right, and that's all I'll say," said Major Rand. "Climb aboard, cadet. Okay, crew, close 'er up and shove off!"

Taking a seat alongside Major Rand, Cadet Bradshaw gazed longingly at the flight line of trainers and said, "Now I know for sure that you've got the wrong guy. Yes, sir, a mistake has been made. Who the devil would ever associate a cadet with intelligence, either with a big or little 'I'?"

II

STICKING strictly to military procedure, Major Rand and Cadet Bradshaw moved from that "Incoming" ramp on Washington's airport into Colonel Patch's Pentagon Building office. Rand made the necessary brief introduction.

"Sit, cadet," Colonel Patch ordered. "That'll be all, Major Rand.

"You come highly recommended, Cadet Bradshaw," the colonel then remarked, after calling for, receiving, then consulting a file marked: Bradshaw, Paul Anthony, Cadet, U. S. A. F. "We've a job of work that you might do for us."

"Beg pardon, sir," the cadet chanced, guessing that he might just as well start fighting for his right to go on with flight training, "but my status is 'cadet,' and the understanding was that my Uncle Sam train me for that—and not farm me out on jobs for other non-flying departments."

That was brave talk from a cadet. Really, a long speech. But cadets and enlisted men have gone down into limbo for less, and having cast the die, young Bradshaw waited for the explosion. No explosion shook the mighty Pentagon, however.

Instead, Colonel Patch set the Bradshaw file aside for a moment, shook out a deck of cigs, extended the offer toward the cadet, then mused, "You're right about your cadet status, but a cadet — Lord love 'em — is neither fish nor fowl. Still, as of this hour, if things go right, you are no longer a cadet. This job calls for a commission. It's a quick way up."

"The rank, sir, is the least of my worries," the cadet stated. "It's the flying I want. I want to get into that battle over Britain. I was schooled over there, sir. My closest friends are in that hell. I was at Oxford when this thing broke."

"I gather all that from this file," the G-2 colonel said. "And I understand your desire for air work. Hell, you wouldn't be half a man if you'd take less—that is, of your own free will. But your Uncle Sam isn't in this war yet. There's plenty of time. You young fellers can never understand that things like this run into years. Don't rush the issue, don't push the thing!"

"They say we're on the edge of the thing, sir," the cadet reminded the colonel. "And

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the R. A. F. knows that the Hun is rushing the issue. I saw some of that, sir. I saw the beginning of the blitz."

"Well, as for our getting in," Colonel Patch said—"maybe. We usually do, 'cause we're that kind of *hombres,* cadet. Thank God. But there's spade work to be done. This spade work reaches into every corner of the world. And with England and France under the gun, your Uncle Sam is the only one left to do it. He's the only one retaining some freedom of movement. This job I'm offering you entails plenty of movement. A young fellow like you should go for it."

"But why me, sir? I'm no soldier, and—"

"Yes, I know," the colonel cut in, again reaching for the Bradshaw file, and shaking out a long cadet-application questionnaire in Paul A. Bradshaw's own handwriting. "However, it's this travel record that convinced this office of your immediate, urgent value. Cadet, you've been places."

"But I was only a kid, sir," the cadet reminded the G-2 colonel. "I was just skylarking through Europe, North Africa and Asia Minor."

"But your father and his party weren't," Colonel Patch said. "He was working for the President—trying to ferret out just what the hell Hitler-Mussolini and Company were building; and your father was just the man for the job, son. I knew something about the J. Anthony Bradshaw Interests. I was, until this G-2 assignment, with Army Engineers. For example, I was standing on the quay when your Bradshaw party sailed from Naples, for Italian North African ports. I was in civvies, of course."

"That was a great day, sir," Paul Bradshaw recalled.

"And I was aboard a British patrol boat in Alexandria when your father came back from Beyrouth, after shipping your mother's body west for American burial," Patch said.

"And that was a bad day, sir," young Bradshaw recalled.

"It was, I'm sorry," the colonel agreed. "One more thing, I had just quit Poland, by less than twenty-four hours, when your father died in the first air raid on Warsaw. And that was a very bad day, wasn't it, cadet?"

"That, sir, is why I can't get back to England any too soon. I don't need to tell you that," the cadet stated.

"No, you don't. But, you see, I know something about your travels abroad. Your father's part. Your fitness for the job we have in mind. But this isn't a detail that I'll crowd down your throat. It calls for the utmost in wholehearted, enthusiastic cooperation; and without that, Cadet Bradshaw, we're licked."

"How long will I be away from flight training, sir?"

"You've heard of the imponderables that beset the waking and sleeping hours of all the top gentlemen in this great Pentagon Building, cadet," Colonel Patch reminded the sole heir to the mighty Bradshaw Interests. "Well, that's your own personal imponderable, and you're a better man than I if you can make even a close guess. A job such as this might takes weeks. It could run into months. And, as the old song says, it might be forever. Perhaps you won't get back."

"Hmmm," the cadet mused. "Might be some cops-and-robbers stuff, eh, sir?"

"I won't promise you that there won't be," the colonel answered. "However, cadet, I can promise you plenty of the thing you seem to like most—air travel. And who knows, maybe some real air action. You see, you'll travel exclusively by air. We're in a big hurry. You'll suffer no delays. You'll be pushed, pushed, pushed."

"And it'll be big-ship stuff. I like the big jobs, sir. For better or worse, count me in."

"Now you're soldiering," Colonel Patch enthused. "Now, let's see"—and he studied the timepiece on his desk—"I have a scheduled get-together with the Chief and his staff in five minutes. Tell you what: you take time out for a bite to eat, then see the Adjutant about your commission. Oh, yes, we hand out commissions with mail-order speed in this building. You'll be Captain Bradshaw, with the proof on each shoulder, when you see me again. And by then, your future partner in crime—Major Lake—will be on hand to say hello."

COLONEL PATCH, standing and getting ready to quit the room, pressed one of the buttons on his desk. A rear door opened and an enlisted man stepped in.

"Sergeant Smith," the colonel said,

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"you'll pilot Cadet Bradshaw through the mystic maze. First, he goes up for a quick commission. Then he'll want a complete outfit. You'll take him to Special Funds office for the authority and wherewithall. They have his requirements and vouchers all set to go. Then he'll want a bite to eat. Have the captain back here in an hour."

"Yes, sir," Sergeant Smith said. "Right this way, cadet." Then, when they were out in the corridor, the sergeant added, "Here's where your head begins to swim. Wait till you get an eyeful of the doings in this fun-house. Cadet, I've been in this man's army for twenty-three years, but the stuff that comes off here is worth the price of admission. I wouldn't miss it for a farm and free beer.

"Oaky, right in here. Major Sattery, this is Cadet Bradshaw, sent in by Colonel Patch, G-2."

"Oh, yes, yes, yes. Bradshaw? Bradshaw, Paul A., if I remember right. Ah, here it is," and he picked up a file of papers. "Bradshaw, Paul A. . . . to be captain. . . . Mmmm, everything's in order. . . . Raise your right hand, cadet. . . . Now where's that da—that Bible? Bible, Bible, where's the Bible?"

MAJOR SATTERY fished around among books and papers on the long desk-counter and came up with a blue U. S. Army Regulations (the Soldiers' Bible) and Sergeant Smith cupped a big hand across his face and tried not to laugh out loud.

"Okay, cadet. Put your left hand on the Book, and raise your right. . . . Do you swear, etc., etc.? . . . Put it down. Good luck, Captain Bradshaw. Now get the hell out. The sergeant'll tell you what you want to know."

"See what I mean?" Sergeant Smith asked, when they were once more out in the corridor. "Wrong Bible, but you're in."

"I've heard about this mill, sergeant," Captain Bradshaw said, and laughed. "Wasn't it a Western Union boy who got lost in here and came out a general?"

"Yeah, but that kid did extra good," the old sergeant said. "A captaincy isn't too bad. Especially when it takes the curse of being a cadet off a man. Here we are at Special Funds. They can hand you the mint here if they're in the mood. So don't be a bit bashful. Know what you want, and ask for twice as much, and if you don't see it coming up, yell like hell. They like noise."

III

WHEN Captain Paul Bradshaw returned to Colonel Patch's office he did so in the full panoply of an Air Corps captain, right down to the pink pants; and on his six-foot-two of broad young feller, the outfit looked good. He had stopped just short of assuming the silver wings, and this against old Sergeant Smith's ardent urging. For the old noncom had said, "You're missing a bet, young feller. This city is all loused up with guys wearing chest wings, guys that have never been off the ground, and even guys that have dug 'em up from the other war—gents who stumbled around a field for the required solo flight in a Jenny or Standard. If they're worth wearing, they're worth winning, and you can win 'em right here in this commissary for a couple bucks."

"I've got them all but won, down at Randolf," the young Bradshaw fellow said, "and I'd feel like a heel jumping the gun on my team-mates. Good Lord, sergeant, this captain thing is bad enough."

There was a sitting major talking across the desk with Colonel Patch when Sergeant Smith returned Captain Bradshaw to that office.

"Ah, welcome back, Captain Bradshaw," the colonel said. "Captain Bradshaw, shake hands with Major Lake.

"Major Lake, your new aide—Captain Paul Bradshaw. You two better learn how to get along, right from the start, for you're going to be closer than bride and groom. And the honeymoon won't be over till you get back here with what you're being sent East to secure. Oh, that will be all, Sergeant Smith.

"Now, if you newly united gentlemen will just step into the map room I'll get right down to cases with you. We haven't any too much time for preliminaries. You may be shipped out this evening, via southbound ATC plane, of course. As you know, Captain Bradshaw, from now on everything is under the hat. You understand?"

"I think so, sir. The colonel means *no talk?*"

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"No talk. No superfluous personal contacts. No side trips en route. And absolutely no written or typed records, no notes of any kind. Everything in the head.

"Perhaps I'd better establish Major Lake for you, Captain Bradshaw, just so you'll appreciate what manner of man you're living with.

Major Lake is one of those mental marvels with a memory that belies the wildest imagination. I think you know what I mean."

"Like an old-line top sergeant of a new recruit outfit?" Captain Bradshaw asked.

"Exactly, Captain. Major Lake can stand at a roadside and watch traffic roar by for a full half hour, then right out of the old head, tell you the registration number, make, model and color of each car and truck, number of persons in each, and the state of origin—not to mention the condition of tires and a full report on the cars that were smoking badly, thus denoting the danger of worn piston rings."

THE new captain took a good long look at Major Lake, then turned his gaze back to Colonel Patch. "Does he read minds too, sir?"

"How about that, Major Lake?" Patch kidded.

"Yes and no," said Lake, smiling like a cat guilty of canary swallowing. He was a fiftyish man, heavy-lens-wearing, and quite college-professorish, a bit above average height, and, withal, a happy sort of gent. Also, he was a sloppy-looking officer. "I've played around with the mind-reading thing. For instance, when Captain Bradshaw's eyes fell on the map of Libya, just a moment ago, his mind said 'Signor Panti.' "

"Just a moment. You're reading the wrong mind," Colonel Patch said. "That's a name I was about to give you."

"But, sir, Signor Panti did come to my mind when I saw Tripoli and Derna," Captain Bradshaw told his superior.

"But how could it? I hadn't mentioned the name," Colonel Patch said. "Perhaps you two don't need me at all. But where did you get the name, Captain? With whom do you associate it?"

"I knew him well, sir. That is, *a* Signor Panti. He was with my father on that Mediterranean cruise. Truth is, I was led to believe that Signor Panti was along as my private tutor. See how young I was?"

"But you grew up and had your eyes opened?" Patch asked.

"A long time later. Fact is, it was years later before I learned that this Panti was an anti-Fascist agent." Paul stated.

"That's the man," Colonel Patch enthused. "There can be no other. But we didn't know that he had worked with the Bradshaw party. Somebody slipped up there. We should have had that information long ago. Well, I'll be damned. This makes things very simple. At least, it should help us cut corners. We have been trying to contact this Signor Panti for the past six weeks or two months. Our last report from him came through a contact in Bengazi. But we know that he is no longer there."

"It would be too hot for an anti-Fascist there now," Paul Bradshaw agreed, "and I'm willing to bet these new pink pants that my old friend Panti is still a super anti-Fascist."

"We think he might be in either Tripoli or Derna," Colonel Patch said. "Those two coastal towns are due for activities when things break. And the break, gentlemen, isn't far off.

"Now, insofar as we're still at peace with Italy, our Air Transport Command can set you down in any of these Libyan towns. Of course, you'll be under the eye of the Italian secret police from the moment your wheels stop rolling. But as yet there's no law against a couple of American Air Forces officers stopping off for a bit of harmless sightseeing.

"Needless to say, this Operator Panti is undercover, and no doubt plenty deep by now. So it's up to you two to dig him up."

"Ah, the good old cadet's curse—the muck-stick-and-Irish-anchor work," said ex-Cadet Bradshaw. "Now I see why I qualified for this job. The old strong back and weak mind. Beg pardon, sir, I'm all ears again."

"Let's hope it isn't that kind of spade work," Colonel Patch said. "But who knows? Anyway, up till now, I didn't know how on earth our agents were to make themselves known to Panti, but now that you say you know the man, the thing should be simple. Wouldn't you say so, Captain?"

"I'll at least hope so," young Bradshaw

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agreed. "If Signor Panti sees me first, I'm pretty certain he'll recognize me, and act accordingly. But would he recognize me? No, it's hardly likely, after five, nearly six years. I was a kid then. I've got pink pants now. I don't know what to say, Colonel Patch."

"Anyway, that's your set-up, gentlemen," the G-2 colonel concluded. "Briefly, find Signor Panti, if he's alive. Pick him up and bring him back here if he'll ride along. If he won't leave his theater, for any reason, get what information he has and then bring yourself home. Either way, Major Lake, you'll get the Panti report in your head, even before you start back. And get it right, man, get it right; hell itself is due to break out in North Africa."

IV

MAJOR LAKE and Captain Bradshaw were top priority passengers aboard the Miami-bound ATC job which sailed out of Washington's airport at seven that evening. The big two-engined craft was loaded to capacity with Air Forces personnel going down to Florida and points beyond. The skipper was Captain Rance Early, with Lieutenant Stone in the rightside seat, and Sergeant Flower doing the honors as flight engineer. That crew had a record for getting ships there and back. Captain Bradshaw, remembering that he was still a bird in the making, mooched flying time up front like a raggedy-tailed cadet. And after the ice was broken, despite the pink pants, Early and Stone even allowed the ex-cadet to hold the wheel, now and then; so the first leg of the African jaunt wasn't going to be all loss and no fun for the young feller who must find Signor Panti.

The big ship had been scheduled to reach Miami at 11:30, with one stop at Charleston. But a fog bank south of that city had turned them back for a setdown and wait. It was 11:35 before a flash from the Jacksonville control told them to come ahead and give it another try. Hence, the tower at Miami didn't receive their call for landing clearance till along toward two in the morning.

Miami, early that morning, was under a blackout. Seven miles offshore, a torpedoed oil tanker was burning hot and red; and the occasional thud of high explosives showed that the depth-bombs were still trying for an Axis sub, or subs. The U. S. A. was really at war, though she didn't seem to know it.

So the controlmen in the Miami tower were limiting their landing lights to a mere faint ground glow, something that gave only a sketchy idea of the mist-shrouded runway. But the men in the ATC job's control bay had to take that faint ground glow, make the most of what it offered, and pretend that they liked that sort of setdown.

Captain Early, studying the burning offshore tanker just before turning in for his landing, remarked to his co-pilot and Captain Bradshaw, "Uncle Sam's going to get all riled up over that one. This damned war is sure moving in on us Yanks. Let's see, Captain. You and the Major are riding all the war with us, eh? What you doing—going out to make your own war? . . . Say, that Major Lake should be an all-right boss, the way he sleeps and keeps his eye off the hired help. I don't think he's shifted a hand or foot since we took off from Charleston the first time."

Staring backward into the blacked-out cabin, Captain Paul Bradshaw said, "He's still knocking them off, and b'gosh, Captain Early, I think he does rate as a good boss. We're new to each other but—"

Captain Early took his eyes off the business of landing just long enough to glance right—up and back—and say "Eh? . . . Okay, don't answer that question, Captain. I know enough to keep my big mouth shut. Shucks, you two gentlemen have G-2 stenciled all over you. Glad you're going all the way with us, though. We'll have fun. . . . You know, you two boys should be wearing the old chest wings. Nobody'd ever connect pilots with anything intelligent, and I can't figure out why Intelligence is so dumb to overlook that."

After the transport had set down, rolled up to the receiving apron, then killed its motors, Engineer Sergeant Flower broke her open and told the Miami passengers that this was it. Then Captain Early stepped down after them, flight report in hand.

"What say we get us a cup of java, Captain?" Co-pilot Stone suggested. "Want to wake your boss? . . . What a man!—him poundin' the old ear right through a landing!"

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"Far be it from me to wake a major," said young Bradshaw. "Let's go. I want to stay awake tonight and see how you men fly these babies through the black. Smart guys, you gents."

AT THE head of the portable stairway, Lieutenant Stone said, "You keep your eye on the house for a few minutes, Sergeant Flower. And if any first-class femmes come aboard, well just tell 'em that Sport Stone is in the rightside seat on this trip out, and that they'll be in good hands. Maybe you'd better not mention the hands, Sergeant."

"Wilco, sir. I'll remember that," the sergeant said.

A minute later, moving through the dim-out toward the coffee shop in Administration, the two came to the gate in the high wire barrier. There was a passenger group being checked past the guard. Captain Bradshaw stood just behind the broad back of young-and-fly Co-pilot Stone as that stocky gent sort of stepped aside and sucked in his tummy to allow five hurrying girls freer passage directly across his bow. Following the five girls, there were three men who likewise checked past the guard and moved across the cement toward the waiting transport. The three lugged instrument cases.

"Well, now, that there's very nice," the co-pilot told Bradshaw, with enthusiasm. "That'll be a USO group going out with us, going down to entertain the boys in the islands. Sometimes I wish I was a boy in the islands—one boy shipwrecked on one island with some of the gals we've ferried for the USO. Come on, Captain! Let's get that java so's I can get back and tell the cuties all about me. Y'know, there's just a chance you'll get to hold the wheel for most of the way tonight. Tell you what, when there's show gals aboard neither Captain Early nor yours truly spend much time up front. And if the ship wants to get flown, it flies itself—but you can take care of that this trip."

"That'll be fine," Bradshaw agreed. "There'll be plenty of time for the ladies, Stone old man, when there's no longer any flying to be done."

"What a thesis!" Stone laughed. "I figure it the other way: There'll be plenty of time for flying when there's nothing better than flying to be done."

V

SERGEANT Flower, at the head of his stairway, was saying. "Watch your step, girls. . . . Low bridge on that doorway. . . . Take your time in that cabin, we're blacked-out, ya know. . . . Be careful of them feet. They belong to a sleepin' major. . . . All right, gentlemen, you watch your step too. . . . Hey, watch out with that fiddle case! Want to cold-cop a guy?"

After the USO troupe of five girls and three musicians a half dozen sleepy-eyed GI's came aboard. They told Flower that they'd been riding trucks all day and all night, from a camp way hell'n gone up in northern Florida. How about them bedding down in the aft part of the cabin? And Sergeant Flower said, "I was savin' it for you. . . . Come on, girls. Gangway in that aisle. Give way for six gents that've lost all interest."

The five USO girls were having their troubles in the darkness of the cabin. So Sergeant Flower moved in among them to see what could be done.

"What's eatin' you kids" he demanded. "Do I have to show each one where they sit? Hey"—it was in his best low whisper—"keep outa the major's lap. And keep outa that seat next to him. There's a captain rates that seat."

"Say," one of the girls said to Flower, "we passed two nifty-looking officers near the gate. Do they go with this ship? One of them was a peachy king-size captain."

"They do, and that was the captain. I forget his name," the sergeant said.

"Me for him," said a second girl; "and say, kids, did you see the way the Thorntons breezed right past those two prizes—proud red heads high and never a how-de-do?"

"Aw, Ida, have a heart," Irene Thornton begged. "Lay off us Thorntons. You know we have no use for men. And right now, this kid sister of mine is saying her prayers to the side of the ship and trying to get some shuteye. Why don't you tramps try some sleep?"

The Thorntons, Irene and Inez, were one of the best sister acts on the USO circuit; and where they hadn't been in the States, there just were no camps. And now they were heading south and east, down through the island bases to the hump of Brazil—and

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who knows, maybe beyond that. There was a big demand for their classy brand of just-girl song-and-dance act. Irene was the older, and she knew all the answers which some thirty years of life could teach a girl. Inez was just twenty, and it was up to Irene to see to it that the young sister shouldn't learn all those answers too rapidly or too soon. It took a lot of doing—on Irene's part—to keep such a sister act strictly high-class. So many guys had so many ideas for redheaded cuties like Inez Thornton.

Inez added, "Pipe down, gang. Haven't you string-twangers been waiting long enough for this over-due plane, without sitting up the rest of the night? Close your *man*-euvering eyes, honeys, and call it a day. What's two more air guys to gals like you?"

The three male members of the USO group, like the tired GIs, seemed content to double up tightly and try for sleep, but the Ida dame and her two friends weren't fighting their war that way.

'Not us!" Ida said, in answer to the two-way Thornton suggestion for quiet. "We'll be as fresh as daisies when the good-looking flying guys come aboard. . . . Hey, Sergeant, how many?"

"Three," said Sergeant Flower—"not counting me."

"We've had a dark-room look at you, and we're not countin' same," said Ida. "Three of them, three of us—discountin' the Thorntons—so even a mug like me can't go far wrong. Bring 'em on!"

SHORTLY before 2:30, trip's papers in hand, Captain Early joined his co-pilot and Captain Bradshaw in the coffee shop, just for a quick black one. While drinking, he shook out his passenger list and scanned the names.

"USO unit," he said. "Gets off at San Juan. . . . Thornton Sisters, Irene and Inez. . . . Maple, Ida. . . . Did either of you men get a good look at these show girls?"

"Just a passing gander," Stone answered. "Why?"

"This sister act—the Thornton Sisters. Say, I've caught their act. I saw them at the Club Carpetbagger, in Washington, before they quit the hot spots for the USO thing. They're class. Seems to me they quit the Carpetbagger in a huff. Guy—think it was an air colonel name of Warwick—made a pass at the young one—this Inez kid—and the Irene gal like to take said air colonel's scalp off with a high Spanish heel she was wearing and wielding that night."

"You trying to scare me off, Captain?" Lieutenant Stone asked.

"No, just relating hard facts. You must recall the case. This Warwick gent got a change of post, and Public Relations put a quick hush-hush on the whole damned party. Yes, sir, the gals are class. Anybody who'll lift an office colonel's scalp is tiptop for my money. . . . But you watch your step, Stone me boy."

"Come to think of it," Lieutenant Stone decided, "Captain Bradshaw here ranks me. Let him handle the wild ones. I'll stick to my knitting and flying."

WHEN the three officers returned to the ship, Sergeant Flower had already started, reved and warmed its engines. It was within a few minutes of the scheduled clearing time. So Early and Stone just said, "Hello, girls," and moved forward. But Ida Maple made a reach for the third man in line—Captain Bradshaw—jerked him into her lap and begged, "Tell us a bedtime flyin' story, Papa. . . . Ssss, Thorntons—see what I caught."

Captain Paul Bradshaw, glancing at the Thorntons, fought out of Ida's clutches, then regained his seat alongside Major Lake for the take-off.

The Thornton eyes were upon him, dimly in the faint glow of the runway's lights, and he said, "Don't let her fool you, ladies. . . . But I'm outnumbered, and that's not fair."

Irene Thornton said, "With Ida, Captain, you'd still be outnum' ed even if you were quads. . . . My sister, Captain—Inez. We're Thorntons. . . . Ida Maple, Captain. . . . Mary Fay. . . . Elizabeth Anderson. Now we all know one another."

"But you must have a name too," Captain Bradshaw said.

"Oh, yes. Irene the one on the left. But nobody bothers with me when this kid sister of mine is within hailing distance.

"Inez, keep that elbow out of my ribs—why the nudge? What, as I live and learn, you're bashful about meeting the captain! Well what do you know! Well what do *I* know! There's *good news* tonight!"

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VI

MAJOR LAKE stirred slightly, shifting one leg over the other, while Captain Early was booting his big ship off that Miami runway—while the rumble and ground percussion was still sounding throughout the mighty tin can. The major glanced sleepily at the Bradshaw captain, then at the chatting Thornton sister, back to Paul once more, and so to sleep again. Captain Paul Bradshaw was a bit troubled by that sleepy gaze. He didn't know whether the major was telling him off—for too much gab—or just dopily making sure that they were still together. But, anyway, it caused the young captain to recall Colonel Patch's warning against unnecessary personal contacts while en route. Still and all, these were USO girls. They had each been vouched for before they were allowed to ship on any such trip. A man should be able to talk with them. But he wondered. After all, during times like these —with a torpedoed oil tanker still lighting up their sky out front—an ATC plane like this might have five assorted Mata Haris aboard. He'd better play it safe and button his lip. And so thinking, Captain Paul Bradshaw excused himself and moved forward to help Early and Stone with the handling. But, for the first time in a long time, something told young Bradshaw that there could be other things air-borne besides just the flying entailed—for he'd had a good look at that younger Thornton kid; and to say that Inez had registered is putting it sillily. She'd scored!

Co-pilot Stone "talked" quite a fast line of wolfish romancing, but with the ship airborne and the long black haul out ahead, he was just one more intensive airman—with eyes on that old instrument-board, ears for the engines, and all keen trained senses attuned to flight in the night. Such a craft, on an island-studded overwater run, doesn't give its operating crew any too much spare time, and especially when the trip is being flown during the murky hours of a Caribbean blackout.

However, it was a night when they picked up a nice tail wind at 7000 feet; with the air speed going well above the three-hundred-miles-per-hour rate.

They realized that when the San Salvador light came into view far ahead of time. "Man, oh man," Captain Early mused, "we're sure sitting on a breeze this hop. Yea, bo. We'll be in San Juan before sunup.

"Just our luck, Stone me boy. We won't get to tell these USO girls what devils we are."

Captain Bradshaw was standing just behind and between the pilots. Stone glanced at him and asked, "Did you take care of that for us, Captain?"

"Gosh no. I was too busy telling them about me," the watchful waiter confessed. "But one of you could go back now and see what can be done. Sergeant Flower is certainly sitting pretty—and with no competition."

Stone said, "You want to fly, eh? Okay, I'll go back for a spell. I'll keep them awake for the skipper. Slide in, Captain."

During the two hours and forty-seven minutes consumed on the 1000-mile run between Miami and San Juan, both Stone and Early spent a bit of time aft kidding the USO girls. But at the end of each visit, each came back to the control bay with the same general story: "You, Captain, seem to have staked out the prize. Those Thornton redheads want to talk to you, and nothing but you—and the young one glows in the dark when the talk is on you."

"Guys like us might just as well stood home in bed," Stone said. "Oh, well, next trip they won't have you, but they can always get me."

Toward the end of the run things began to soup-up on them; and the first scattered shore lights of Porto Rico came to fleeting view through low clouds. By the time they were abeam Pt. Morrillos light, forty miles west of San Juan, there really was no light to be seen. By then, Captain Early was in constant ship-to-ground communication with the control ahead. And that control ahead reported that the sky, for the time being, was right on the ground at, near, and for miles around the airport. San Juan's tower said, "Better stay upstairs, Captain. Got fuel enough for a bit of waiting?"

Captain Early said he had, thanks to the tail wind which had whisked them eastward with such nice economy and speed. When the elapsed time told them that the forty miles between Pt. Morrillos and San Juan had been flown, the sky below was still a solid blanket of unlit blackness. Still, up

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there at 7000, the clouds were tossed and broken, with a full spread of high stars above and a good moon going down in the west. So the ship circled; while Early and Stone cussed softly and argued the advisability of letting down and giving it a try.

"Sure," Stone agreed. "We don't own the ship, and a guy can always get a new neck and another set of brains."

Circling wide, Captain Early didn't let down, but he did keep in radiophone contact with their destination. The circling went from minutes into a full hour, then well along toward the end of a second hour; and then the skipper and Sergeant Flower began to check the fuel supply, and do a little worrying.

Good daylight was coming into the upper sky now; and the cabin passengers were all sitting up and taking notice. Finally, Captain Early and Paul Bradshaw went aft to explain why the long trip seemed to be winding up on a merry-go-round. And right away the young Bradshaw fellow realized that he was doing most of the explaining to Inez Thornton. Irene had left her seat, and Paul Bradshaw, some way or another, had replaced her alongside the red-top kid. It was very nice too. A young feller wouldn't mind circling, and waiting, just so long as his head was spinning like that.

But all good things have to end. Co-pilot Stone yelled back into the cabin. "Captain Early," he sang out, "the control tower says the sky's up off that runway now. . . . You heard me right, Skipper—we can go in."

Captain Early hurried forward to his seat. Sergeant Flower came aft and said, "Get those safety-belts buckled up. Everybody. That's the stuff. We're going in for breakfast."

So the ship quit the clear morning sky and began to push clouds. The props whirled their discs of silver-gray mist; and that through-the-tunnel feeling came to all hands. Then things began to lighten up again. Soon Captain Early began easing off on the power, feeling for the ground. Then —bango!—the ship was in the clear, trees were swishing by down there, and the airport's long runway was only a few hundred feet below the nose. And Major Lake, now fully awake, glanced over at Captain Bradshaw and asked—"Now how the devil does a pilot do that! How can he hit it on the nose?"

"Sir," the ex-cadet said, "I'm still wondering at that myself. From where I stand, it's beyond me."

"But where you sit," Major Lake mused, "you seem to be doing all right. By the way. Where did we get all these girls?"

VII

WHEN the pilots and Captain Paul Bradshaw returned to the ship—after mooching an early-morning snack at Officers' Mess—they walked in on what looked like a bit of a tiff. There were two jeeps parked close in to the portable stairway, a droopy early-morning driver at each wheel, a lieutenant standing halfway up the stairs—and another arguing, pleading masculine voice emanating from somewhere within the ship.

Sergeant Flower met the oncoming three midway of the apron.

"What goes, sergeant?" Early asked, in a low voice.

"The two redheads, the Thornton sisters," the sergeant answered. "They're back aboard. They insist they're sailing out with the ship that brought them in. There's a hell of a row about something or other."

"Who's the talker?" Stone asked, nodding toward the ship.

"The Public Relations officer. Guess he's officer in charge of entertainment too. A new man to me—colonel name of Warwick."

"Warwick?" Captain Early questioned; and he dug a thumb into Stone's ribs. "Remember that name? . . . Carpetbaggers . . . the Thornton Sisters. . . . Spanish heel . . . against American heel's scalp? This must be it."

"That Major Lake," Sergeant Flower told the three, "has been standing off the colonel. Wow. Is the major askin' for it!"

"He could stop being a major for that," Stone agreed.

"Not my boss," Captain Paul Bradshaw cheered, silently. "I have an idea he'd tell off a general. Fat lot a brain like Major Lake has to care for rank! If the service doesn't like the way he plays the game, he'll take his bat and go home. . . . But what a nice break for us if the girls are going to ride along."

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"For you, yeah. But maybe grief for us if they try to stand off a colonel—on his own post," Captain Early said. "But let's see what's to be done. . . . Hell's bells, gentlemen, I'm the captain of this ship, and of my soul."

When the three began climbing the steps, Irene Thornton's voice was doing the saying. "Colonel Warwick, for the last time, I'm repeating what you should know by heart by now—my sister and I refuse to remain on the same post where your filthy presence is in evidence. Mister, you stink."

"Colonel," Major Lake's much quieter voice added, "why can't you take the lady at her word?"

"Again, Major," Warwick barked, "I'll remind you of your rank!"

"Gangway, please!" Sergeant Flower sang out, from the foot of the ladder. "The ship's captain is coming aboard."

When Captain Early stepped into the cabin, Colonel Warwick moved aside. Early saluted, but it wasn't much of a salute.

"All ashore that are going ashore," the skipper kidded, but it was a hollow sort of

kidding. "We're late. We're shoving off. You riding with us this trip, Colonel?"

"I'm Public Relations officer on this post," Colonel Warwick made known. "I'm also subbing for the entertainment officer. These USO ladies were booked in here—with their troupe—and now they're refusing the assignment. Captain, if it becomes necessary, I'll have to ask you to order them out of this ship."

"Ladies, get out of this ship," Captain Early said.

"We refuse," said Irene Thornton. "And that stands."

Captain Early turned to Warwick, hunched his shoulders, spread his hands wide, and said, "What now, sir?"

"It's your command, Captain," the colonel stated.

"Exactly, sir," Captain Early agreed. "Get out, Warwick, you lousy heel!"

The Public Relations colonel's jaw fell, and his eyes popped. "Do you realize what you are saying? Do you know who I am?"

"Do I know who you are!" Early exploded. "Do I know—I, a feller who gets around, goes places, talks with gents who, in turn, know all about the happenings in Washington—such as the brawls at the Club Carpetbaggers. Warwick, another change of post will find you hanging onto the edge of South America, with no direction but off and out. Off the Air Forces' payroll and out of the service. Now if you know what's good for you, you'll step out of this ship and get back to your quarters, back to your inside drinking."

"The captain is offering good sound advice, sir," Major Lake said. "You're slightly outnumbered by gentlemen who don't care a damn—pardon me, ladies—for any show of rank. You'll run into such a condition, now and again, in any branch of service. Good-bye, Colonel."

Sergeant Flower came running up the steps. "Okay, ground crew," he sang out to the two enlisted men standing by at the foot of the portable, "take 'er away."

Colonel Warwick gave Flower a hard look, lipped something between closed teeth, and stepped out and headed down. The colonel knew that he'd been both called and told—and that mention of another post was too, too real.

SERGEANT FLOWER slammed the clanking door shut, right on the irate colonel's heels, and sang out, "Okay here, sir." Early, grinning from ear to ear, started and checked his engines, took the green flash from the tower, then got off that field in a hurry.

Except for a few tons of mail and express matter, they had taken nothing aboard, no extra passengers. So it was just a nice comfortable family circle of seven that now and then gazed aft and saw San Juan dim out in the morning mists.

The Thornton sisters, with the row set-

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tled to their liking, were willing to forget, laugh, kid and enjoy life in good company. And when the ship was on its course again, Captain Early turned it over to Stone and came aft to talk things over.

"Well, what now, Thorntons?" he asked. "Where to—all the way with us?"

"Oh, no can do, Captain; much as we'd like to," Irene said. "Our next stop calls for a day, tomorrow, at the air field on San Lucia."

"That's what I was afraid of. It's our next stop, so we'll have only 450 miles of your sweet company," Early told them; "but that's better than leaving you back there with the Warwick boy. Nice gent, the Warwick. Lucky for you kids that I knew all about your brush with him at the Club Carpetbaggers. I was all primed for the meeting."

"And we can't tell you how much we owe you," Irene said.

"You don't owe me a thing. Gosh, lady, that might be the making of me. You can't imagine how my stock will go up when word of that transaction goes east and west out of here. I'll be able to borrow money from guys I've never even met before," said Early.

"There's one thing I can't figure," Paul Bradshaw said. "How come a colonel—even an office colonel—to be up so early in the morning? Does this Warwick get up early so's he'll have a longer day to cause grief?"

"He isn't up early, Captain," Irene said. "He's up late. Our group was just going into the Hostess House when Colonel Warwick came in the main gate—and saw us."

"The big bad man," Inez added, "was a bit drunkie. There were two other officers in his jeep when they came through the gate. They'd been in town on a party, Captain Paul. Won't you sit down?"

Captain Early caught Irene's eye—and rolled his own; and then he went forward. Then Irene turned to talk with Sergeant Flower.

Major Lake had been sitting in Early's seat, watching Stone handle the flying. When the major began to get out, Early said, "Stay right there, sir. . . . Say, Stone old man, this is a devil of a set-up. I'm the big-shot hero aboard this ship. I shoved out my chin—and neck—to save the fair ladies from the bad wolf. And you know what happens? The Bradshaw boy wins the girl."

"He'll do it every time," Stone sighed. "Every air mile of the way. Now what has that gent got that we haven't?"

"Perhaps a few hundred million dollars," Major Lake said.

Both airmen stared at the major. Neither spoke, except with their eyes.

"The young fellow, you know, is sole heir to the worldwide Bradshaw Interests holdings, railroads, oil refineries, mines, construction companies and what have you! That's a secret, and he didn't tell me. I got the information from my chief, in Washington," Lake said. "And you gentlemen will keep it secret, I feel sure."

VIII

FOUR long hops—some 3,600 air miles—later, the big ship came down for its first African landing at Bathurst, British Gambia.

"Gentlemen," Early remarked to Major Lake and Captain Bradshaw, "here is where flying really begins."

"Here," Stone added, "is where you'd best change parachutes for wings, if you get what I mean. It's thirty-four hundred miles to Cairo, and damned tough walking every step of the way. Last time I walked it, I got lost at two different street intersections. And if the desert doesn't lure you down, well the Hun and Italian planes swoop out of the north and shoot you into the sand. Gentlemen, this Libyan warring is getting rougher by the hour. They don't like us."

"That's where the captain and I get off," Major Lake told them. "We may even go in among the Italians. As tourists, of course."

"Maybe as corpses," said Stone. "But that's your biz, sir, whatever your biz might be. And you'll pardon a subordinate's sass when he adds—You're damned welcome to same."

The ship underwent a two-days' workover in the Bathurst hangar, and, for his own purposes, Major Lake seemed to attract just about every footloose press correspondent in the area. Guys with plenty of broken English, but one desire: to get up into that Italian-held territory at Uncle Sam's expense. So Captain Early had a sixteen-man

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load in the passenger cabin when Operations gave him the word to rise and fly. Two desert stops later, Early turned north—away from the regular Allied trans-Africa route—to tempt the deserts of Fezzan.

When Tripoli was within an hour's flight, Captain Early picked the correspondent with the thickest Italian accent and put him on the air via the ship-to-station radio, requesting permission to land at Tripoli. The okay came through, designating the Italian airport to be used.

"Nuts to them," said Early to Major Lake and Bradshaw. "I'll put this Yank ship down on no Italian-German port. We'll pick a spot when we get a good look at the Tripoli area—and there she is out front."

After a good look-see, Early decided on a stretch of desert on the eastern outskirts of the city. "How does it look to you?" he asked Stone.

"Jake. If we want to be alone," the co-pilot decided.

"That's the idea. We want to keep off that east-west military highway. You and I will stick with the ship."

Standing with Major Lake, just behind the choosing pilots, Paul Bradshaw said, "That'll be a good spot, Captain. That's an old Italian monastery—there on the northern edge—that walled-in compound. I was there when I was a kid, and there'll be plenty water and food for the asking."

"You here before?" Stone mused. "Maybe you'll be able to promote a bucket of Dago red. I could sure go for anything wetter than dust. It's the devil how African dust will come up to you at nine or ten thousand feet, eh?"

When the ship rolled to its desert stop, about an eighth of a mile southwest of the monastery, and a good two miles from the city's eastern edge, a few pokey dusky roustabouts from the goat herds and camel corrals came afield to gaze at the American ship.

The foreign correspondents unloaded and kicked like the very devil, saying that it was unfair to unorganized gentlemen of the press—dumping them out so far from town.

"M'gosh, gents," Stone said, "all's you have to do is rub a lamp, out here on the desert, and up pops a jinni to do your bidding. Now don't tell me that all you boys went and forgot to bring your rubbing lamps!"

"Ah, I knew you press boys wouldn't have to wait long," Early suddenly exclaimed. "Here come all the King's men and most of Mussolini's fat boys to see what's what."

There was a dust-tossing string of five Italian Army personnel cars coming down the desert trail that led south—past the monastery compound—from the east-west military highway. And, as Early had hinted, the equipage bristled with tin hats and arms in evidence.

Major Lake, ranking as top Yank, stepped forward to handle the niceties. The Italian officers had some English, so the major explained that Captain Early and he were sponsoring this little desert excursion for the benefit of the correspondents.

"Our presence here does not offend our good Italian friends?" Lake asked.

"Ah, no, no, no!" the top Italian enthused. "Italy she is the good frien' by America."

"Then I wish to hell they'd lower some of those guns," Stone growled toward Sergeant Flower. "They could be loaded. They could go off. That isn't the way I'd like to be half-shot, just now."

OF COURSE, the Italian officers wanted to know why the good American friends had landed out there in the wide-open spaces, especially after receiving the so-kind Italian invitation to land at Tripoli's best air field. And Major Lake lied like a fine gentleman, assuring the Italians that no offense was meant. The pilot, Captain Early, wasn't much of a big-ship man, according to Major Lake, and an ordinary mile-long runway wouldn't be enough space for him. "Then again, Colonel," the Yank major confided, sub rosa, "Uncle Sam doesn't know we're here. It's a little joy ride we fixed up for these press boys. We wouldn't want an official arrival reported on an official airport. The colonel understands?"

"Ah, yes, yes, yes," the Italian colonel agreed. "You are what the American calls . . . how you say it—Hay W O Wool?"

"That's it," Lake laughed. "We're on our own, and now these writers would like to ride into Tripoli. Their reports will be favorable to Il Duce's propaganda aims, and will the colonel kindly extend our highest regards, through channels, to Il Duce?"

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"Viva Il Duce!" barked the Italian colonel; and all other Italians present went into the usual ecstasy of Fascista saluting.

On the side, while the Italians were loading the press boys aboard, Major Lake gave a few last stand-by orders to Early and Stone.

"We'll shake this gang in town," he said. "You boys be set to get under way. If you see two small clouds of dust rolling out this way, it might be Captain Bradshaw and myself picking 'em up and setting them down. If we have to go, needless to say we'll go without any press representation."

"Sir," Early said, "if there's the faintest show of trouble, you two will have to grab us on the fly. We have enough fuel aboard to get us back to the trans-Africa route, so we'll not bother these Italians for any more here. It will get us off the ground light and sure—just in case. Yes, sir, we'll be right here, eyes open, ears up, and ready to be hit on the tail."

So the five-car caravan started for town, and Early, Stone and the sergeant settled down to a hot, fly-infested wait for whatever the near future might hold and unfold for them.

IX

IT WAS hot high noon before the Italian-escorted Lake-Bradshaw party rolled into Tripoli; and it was close to one o'clock before the Lake-Bradshaw combination managed to shake themselves loose from the others, in one of the smelly busy bazaars. Hurrying then, the two went here and there, following certain instructions carried in Major Lake's head. But the city was close held by all sorts of police agents: colonial, Italian Army and Mussolini's own Fascist strong boys.

At no time, any place, did Lake and Bradshaw feel that they were alone. And too many people wanted to help them do whtatever it was they wanted to do—even just plain sightseeing.

"If the Panti fellow should spot and recognize you," Major Lake said, after an hour or so of the aimless search had ended, "I doubt that he'd take a chance tipping his hand. He might not even pass the time of day. But here's another bazaar, so let's give it a slow walk-through just for luck. Who knows?"

"There's only one thing to our advantage," Captain Paul Bradshaw told his partner, "and that's the size, or lack of size, of this city. If it was bigger, I'd say we were looking for the needle in a haystack, but Tripoli is no giant."

"Even so," Major Lake said, "we can't work it house by house. There should be some short-cut to what we want. Say, how about that old cluster of compound buildings near where we landed, you said it was a monastery?"

"I was just thinking of that," Paul Bradshaw agreed.

"I know you were," Lake said, and grinned. "It might be an idea. The religious factions aren't any too hot for this Fascist business. If I got you right, you were mixing Panti, monastery, Panti, friar, Panti, etc., etc., in great style."

"Oh, the mental telepathy stuff, eh?" Captain Paul Bradshaw asked. "It works, does it?"

"Certainly it does," Lake stated, without the least show of doubt. "All you need is one mind that, for the moment, is idling, just coasting; and, for the other half of the act, a second mind that's busting its buttons trying to solve something. In this case you were coasting, and I was doing the mental sweat. So I got you."

"Well, you were right. I was mixing Panti, friar, Panti, monastery, uncle, and so on," the younger man admitted.

"I missed the 'uncle' item," Major Lake said. "Where does that fit in?"

"Signor Panti's uncle. I just remembered that it was Signor Panti who insisted that we visit the monastery compound. One of the friars was an uncle of his."

"Good Lord, man, you've been holding out on me," Major Lake exclaimed. "This is something. These Italians are like our Mex friends—they have millions of uncles, aunts and cousins. Truth is, if they come originally from the same part of Italy, they're aunts, uncles or cousins. But anyway, it's worth a try. Let's get out of town—and keep an eye open and see how many guys we suck out in our wake."

The public bus took them eastward on the main military road to a point within half a mile of the monastery compound. There was a goat-herd drifting his pack down the dusty lane when the two Americans and one

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other passenger quit the bus. When the goats had passed, Lake and Bradshaw turned south, slowing down to a lazy crawl by way of allowing that other passenger to go ahead. Instead, the stranger came alongside to ask a question.

"Are the American gentlemen also visiting the friars in the monastery?" he asked, in better than fair English.

"The monastery?" Major Lake asked. "Oh, that group of buildings down there—is that a monastery? No, friend, we are not. We quit the bus because we saw this herd of goats. I am a sheep man, from Montana, and this breed of stock intrigues me."

"Ah, too bad that you do not visit the old monastery," the Italian urged.

"Well, don't let us hold you up, mister," the major said, or urged. To get rid of the third party, the Americans drifted over toward the Arab merchants' stalls in the lean-to shacks along the compound wall. There were leather workers, metalsmiths, pottery turners, plus kids, dogs and goats. And while the Americans studied the native handiwork, with one eye, they kept watch on that third passenger with the other. He had moved ahead to the great main gate in the long wall, and there stood in the heavy shade of a great bay tree.

"He could be just one more visitor," Captain Paul Bradshaw surmised.

"But my guess is that he's keeping an eye on two Americans," the major said. "He could be a police shadow."

"Didn't you pick up anything on the mental telepathy beam?" Bradshaw kidded.

"Not from that gent," said the major. "No, sir, he was outsparking me. No idly-ing, coasting brain there. Didn't you get those eyes? Two gimlets, no less."

Besides the several tradespeople along the wall, there were also the usual beggars—or more than the usual number of usual beggars. The nationality of these mendicants was anybody's guess. One beggar, about ten yards removed from the great bay tree, was different—not that he was any cleaner, but he had English at his command when he spoke. And when he spoke, very low, he said, "It is a Fascista spy near the gate, Americans." And that was all.

Major Lake tossed a U. S. four-bit piece into the man's outstretched bowl. He said, without a second glance, "Thanks for the tip, friend." Then Paul and he moved along.

"That was an Italian voice, not Arabian, sir," Bradshaw remarked.

"So I thought," Lake agreed. "Somebody with us, eh?"

By the time the two reached the shade of the big bay tree, the third ex-passenger of the bus had his eyes fixed on the American transport plane, out there on the desert where Early, Stone and the sergeant were still sweating out the noonday wait.

"Ah, American aeroplan', yes?" the Fascist spy asked, as though the discovery were all his.

"Eh? Where?" Major Lake asked, and he, too, registered the surprise of discovery. "By George, it is! Captain"—this to his companion—"did you notice that big plane? It is American, isn't it?"

"Why, yes, it seems to be—the markings are American. Say, I wonder if we could get a trip out of here, to wherever that ship might be going?" young Bradshaw questioned.

The Italian studied both Americans closely; and there was a show of sudden alarm in his face. Lake's gaze didn't miss that!

Lake said, "Ah, I think I know who must have brought that airplane in—it must have been that other pair of strange American officers we saw in the bazaar—that major and captain with those foreign correspondents and Italian Army officers. Yes, sir, we might get in touch with them. Too bad we didn't stop to talk with them in the bazaar, Captain."

Wordless with dismay and ill-concealed surprise, the Italian was noticeably running a mental temperature. There was fear in his official soul—the fear, no doubt, that he had made a great mistake and tailed the wrong Americans. Of a sudden, he quit mopping his brow, jammed his straw hat on his head, then started back toward the bus line.

Within the gate, the Americans stopped to chat where they found three elderly friars busy with their gardening.

"How do you do, gentlemen," one of the three said, and his English was free, easy and exactly correct. "Could we be of service to you? Americans, are you not?"

"That's right, Brother," Captain Paul Bradshaw answered. "Thanks. Perhaps you can be of great service to us. Several years

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ago I visited this monastery. I was with my parents and my Italian tutor—Signor Teodoro Panti. He had an uncle here in your order."

"Signor Teodoro Panti?" the friar speculated, and his eyes sort of studied his two fellow gardeners. "Signor Panti? There are many with the name Panti."

One of the other friars grunted a few Italian grunts, just a few seemingly aimless words, and continued to gaze at the Americans with a kindly deadpan expression.

Then the English-speaking friar asked, "Did the American gentleman take anything with him when he departed our monastery?"

"Why of course," Paul Bradshaw exclaimed, reaching in a pocket for a large billfold. "Who could come here without receiving a fine gift of your St. Agostino's special medal?" and, from an inner section of the billfold, he produced the medal.

The three friars studied the medal closely, then it was handed back to young Bradshaw. He, in turn, passed it on to Major Lake. "The brothers," Paul explained, "strike these medals off in their own molds. Nice work, isn't it, sir?"

"It is one of our medals," the friar said. "Would the American gentlemen care to walk with me in our vineyard? This way, gentlemen. We are proud of our vineyard."

When the three were alone in the far end of the garden, the friar used his cassock's skirt to knock a good quarter inch of desert dust from a stone bench, then the three sat down.

"Young man, you didn't give me your name," the friar said. "Have you it to show —on a paper, or something?"

"My neglect, Brother," young Bradshaw begged, and again he brought out the billfold. "Paul Bradshaw is my name. If you were here when I came, you might recall that Signor Panti came across in my father's yacht. We were a large party."

"I was here," the friar said, and he studied the Bradshaw name stamped on the billfold, on cards therein, on the American's identification disc, and on the inner case of his wrist-watch.

"And you, sir?" the friar then asked.

"Lake is the name," the major answered. "U. S. Air Force. Assigned with Captain Bradshaw to contact Signor Panti."

"I believe that all is well, gentlemen," the old friar finally decided. "I am the uncle of Teodoro. He has worked long for your government, and for the British. We Pantis are strictly anti-Fascista, gentlemen. Teodoro poses as one of the beggars outside the gate. You, no doubt, passed him on the way in."

Paul Bradshaw laughed. "We did," he said. "He spoke a word of warning to us. A Fascist spy had followed us from the city. I should have recognized him, or, at least, his voice."

"Ah, but Teodoro is such an unspeakable, disreputable beggar. I am ashamed of him —for the family," the friar said. "Better alive in rags, however, than dead in a Fascista-made grave. Yes, Teodoro will have much of interest for you American officers."

X

WHEN Beggar Panti came in to meet the Americans in the privacy of the garden tool shed, his greeting was as whole-hearted and emotional as only a Sicilian's can be for somebody once lost and now regained.

"Paul, my old friend! A man-grown, an officer! Ah, you are a sight for these eyes, thank God. I knew you, my boy, after you passed in the lane. . . . Don't mind these tears. . . . I fill up, I fill up and run over with joy."

"Glad to be back, Signor Panti, my old tutor," Paul said. "My *private* tutor! And to think that you were just kidding me."

Bradshaw, introducing Major Lake, briefed their purpose in Africa; and Panti agreed that they'd have to do some more brief work and get out of there.

"The spy you so cleverly sent away, Major, will be back, rest assured. With him, there will come others. Is your airplane ready to leave?" And even as he spoke, Beggar Panti was changing from the rags into a peasant's smock and battered felt hat.

"We're ready when you are, Signor Panti," Major Lake said. "I'll stroll out to the ship, now, and have the crew start their engines. You two come after the engines have been started, and we'll be ready to hop off."

When the engines burst into firing, then began snarling through their test run, Friar Panti, with his cossack streaming in the whirlwind thrown aft by the propellers,

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came out on the desert and contrived to become involved—rather loudly and heatedly—in an argument with a goatherder who had been careless enough to allow those monastery nannies to wander afield—in so much danger of being destroyed by the whirling propeller blades! And while Friar Panti was doing his stuff, Captain Bradshaw and the other Panti climbed aboard the transport entirely unnoticed by the natives.

As Sergeant Flower closed his portside door, and sang out his, "Okay here, sir!" two Italian Army personnel cars were seen coming down the lane in a cloud of dust. Captain Early eased full power to his engines, lifted the tail off the ground, wig-wagged a good-bye with the rudder, and went away from there in a cloud of dust that was strictly American-made.

From Tripoli south to the nearest ATC control base it was a matter of 600 air miles. Signor Panti talked his report into Major Lake's left ear for the full distance. But he had a report which he had promised British Army Intelligence in Cairo. Major Lake talked it over with Captain Early.

"Why not?" Early enthused. "Everybody hops to Cairo nowadays. But I warn you, sir, you'll lose your ship there. Sure as you're born, if they see this bus come in on that port, they'll cut 'er out and route her east for the India theatre."

"But we'll get transportation back?" Lake asked.

"Oh, sure. They're always ferrying jobs west," Captain Early answered. "Plenty good jobs, too. Some of the big stuff, being sent down to Gambia for overhaul, etc."

So, for another thousand miles of air work, Signor Panti talked into Major Lake's other ear.

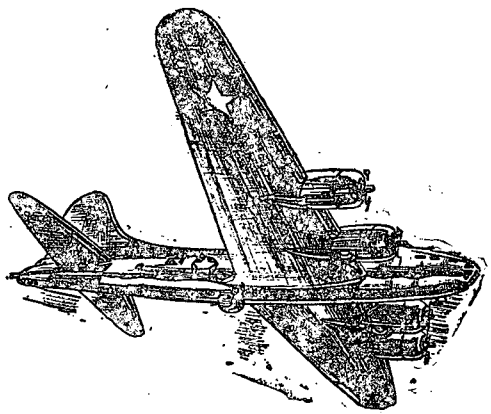
He had lots to report.

CAPTAIN EARLY had forecast Cairo ATC's snatching ways to a cat's whisker of accuracy. Not only was the ex-airlines ship grabbed—with great joy—but its crew was tempted by the devil of promises. How would they like to make a few trips on the Cairo-to-Chungking run? Early, Stone and Sergeant Flower were only human, and they'd never been east of Suez. So the three came around to the Shepherd Hotel to say good-bye, and advise Lake-Bradshaw and Company to get in touch with ATC right away, that is if they were in a hurry to hop westward for home.

At sunset of the second day in Cairo, Lake-Bradshaw and Signor Panti climbed aboard a Liberator for the return trans-Africa flight to Bathurst. The big four-engined job was carrying a load of seventeen other Yanks. Gone were all the comforts of their old craft. Now they squatted on their luggage, or sprawled in rest on the hard temporary floorboards of the bomb-bay and gunners' section. But it was all one happy family, at that. This was a Liberator which had seen action in British hands, and now, battle-scarred and calling for overhaul, it was working its way westward.

A Major Beesley was in command, holding down that left seat. Lieutenant Kincade was his co-pilot. She had a navigator aboard, Lieutenant Rance. And the radioman was Staff Sergeant Higgenbottom. The thirteen passengers were all hard-boiled Yanks who had seen off-the-record battle service with the desert British; and now they were sailing home to school thousands of other American crewmen in the actual art of aerial warfare. All in all, she was a tough crew.

The big battlewagon made its first desert-control stop during the black hours of the night. Nothing out of the usual had happened during that first thousand miles of



westward flight. But on the second leg, along toward nine in the morning, three two-engine Italian Breda light bombers came down out of the Libyan desert and made a friendly try—with all guns spitting—for a playful hit on the big Yank job. For a few minutes the tracers filled the air, but the Yanks had had a fair warning, and all gun positions were quickly manned. When it

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was all over, Captain Paul Bradshaw and Major Lake had had their baptism of fire, and the Italian air force had two less Bredas, and a third that limped away on one engine.

"Poor damned fools," Major Beesley remarked, "thinking they could jump a ship like this—loaded with wild men."

When the Liberator was some two hundred miles west of Lake Chad, over on the Nigerian border, a desert sand storm whirled down out of the northwest. By taking it up to 14,000, Beesley was able to retain some visibility, but there was no horizon; and after an hour of the roughest air work he or his co-pilot had ever labored through, the skipper decided that that couldn't go on. Then, when a check of the fuel supply warned him anew that a drastic change was in order, he sent Co-pilot Kincade rearward to warn all hands to get feet forward, flat on the floor, with their luggage and barracks-bags rigged as buffers. "We might stop—but quick," he said.

"We're going to try for a landing," Kincade told them, "and it might wind up with a rough stop. If any of you men know anything about prayer, well, this might be a swell place, and time, to give it a workout. . . . Get your arms and coats up over your faces when we begin to bounce."

Major Beesley began to let down. He had no definite idea of direction, and could only make a rough guess as to whether he was riding on, or heading into, that hellish wind. All visibility ended at the ship's windows, dust was pouring through supposedly wind-tight frames and fittings, and the sirocco had the engines choking for air and pinging hot, with every man aboard doing a two-way sweat—first from the hellish heat, secondly because of the tough landing outlook ahead and below.

There came a time when Major Beesley, with his four engines turning up all the power that full throttle would afford, guessed that he had the old bus headed into the wind; and he yelled across the few intervening feet of control-bay space to ask his co-pilot what he thought.

"She seems to be biting into something," Lieutenant Kincade yelled back. "You've got the bounce and wiggle out of it, and I'd say—— There's a tree!"

There was a tree. Part of it was slithering across the right wing, between Kincade's side window and the hoary whirling disc of dust which showed where No. 3 engine's propeller was boring its way through the flying sand cloud. Then that whirling propeller clipped some more tree tops and slammed a gob of rubble against the side of the ship.

"This is down!" Major Beesley sang out, and, so saying, he cut his switches, pulled the wheel into his belly—and, no doubt, closed his eyes, said his prayers, and stopped breathing for a bit.

There was hardly the sign of a bump. If they were on the ground, then the mighty wind cushion had done the trick far better than any pilot could. And they must have been on the ground, for, after a few seconds, the wild men in the aft cabin started moving about—quickly turning the prayerful hoping to noisy thankful cussing.

Major Beesley released his cramped hands from the wheel, and just let them droop and drop. "I'm not proud," he said, "and when I see a ship come through a mess like this, all in one piece, I'm willing to admit that it was God Almighty who made the setdown. Now we'll just wait till this wind goes down, and let's hope we're not sitting on a high sand dune with air under it. I have high hopes, but I still doubt."

It was a full hour before the wind eased off enough to give them visibility beyond the wing tips. And when that visibility did come, all hands took one good look and well nigh did another sweat. The Liberator was in the center of a native village of mud huts, with high-poled grass-thatched roofs, no definite street plan, and half a dozen trees. The trees were great, bare-limbed giant baobabs; and the greatest of the group was about ten feet in front of No. 4 engine's prop, while the second largest of the village baobabs was not more than seventy-five feet behind the ship's wide tail surface. There was a five-foot mud wall off to the left, and, luckily, there had been no roof on that, for a good ten feet of the left wing's tip overhung the pig population within.

"This just couldn't happen," Beesley stated. "It's a bad dream. But what say, Kincade—does it look hopeless? . . . How about it, Sergeant O'Brien"—this to his flight engineer—"do we have to take her apart to get her out of here?"

"I'll take a look-see, sir," O'Brien said,

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first glancing at his sidearm, then opening the door. There were a few natives visible, out there on the edges of the increasing dusty visibility, and the sergeant couldn't be too sure about their state of mind. Five minutes later, O'Brien came back. He reported, "She's a devil of a set-up, an' no dam'foolin'. There don't seem to be no take-off space on either side of this village. The village is just what you see from here—maybe two dozen o' these Wakakee shacks—and she's in sort of a draw. If you'd been a hundred yards either side, sir, we'd've smacked rough sand dunes. And we'd have no problem. We'd just be dead."

"Is there any help here—many blacks in this village?"

"Just what you can see. I think some of them have had one look and taken to the brush, sir," O'Brien answered. "The few I got near was scared stiff. This must be hell'n'gone back in the sticks. I didn't see no French bikes or sewin' machines or oil-can roofs; and there's no sign of a camel trail leadin' in and out any place."

"But we must be just about west of Chad," Beesley said, "and if this village is in a draw, with some vegetation, we can't be too far north and west. The cuvette sinks are near the lake."

"Well, we'll need plenty strong backs if we're to snake this baby outa here," O'Brien said. "And, man, oh man, will we need our old voodoo medicine to get them blacks back outa the brush!"

"Let's start work," Lieutenant Kincade suggested. "We'll get this San Diego sand scorpion out in the open or know the reason why. I hate to walk with sand in my shoes—and no shoes after the first hundred miles. Come on, let's get some trinkets together and start the slave-market activities. . . . Gentlemen, I have a jackknife here that'll have the Chief and all his sons diving."

XI

AFTER the storm had passed, it took the rest of that day to size up the situation and map out a definite plan. They discovered that the mighty tonnage was a good two miles from a hard-baked flat in the long draw where a take-off try might be made. But first, it would be necessary to grub out a series of tough thorn-tree thickets and corduroy a hundred-yard stretch of boggy savanna. It would take natives for that kind of labor, and plenty of natives. Sergeant O'Brien and one of the non-com passengers, a Staff Sergeant Pierce, an armorer, had each been out in the brush on forced landings, so they volunteered to go out now and see what they could induce hither via the trinket-bait method.

When the coolness of the sunset hour offered a short spell during which whites might work, the entire group stripped to the G-string, fell to, and bent the backs to tough labor.

Meanwhile Major Lake had organized the blacks remaining in the village; and in this way something in the line of food was made certain. When darkness crowded in and shut out the work effort, they squatted in the village's colonial-required public guest house and ate yams, plantains, guinea fowl and the fixings—cocoanuts, ground nuts and oranges.

"Not bad at all," Major Beesley told his gang. "Say, this empty official resthouse makes me think that we're not as far back in the sticks as O'Brien intimated. The colonial authorities make these villages erect and maintain these shelters, so these people must be under some close authority. Damned funny we can't get any kind of talk through their noggins. They no savvy worth a damn."

"Maybe they're on the outs with the authorities," Rance suggested. "That sometimes happens, as I get it. Just too damned bad for us if this neck of the woods is stocked with ladies and gents who have a mad-on against the white cousin."

"It could run into murder," Major Lake mused. "These blacks are doing a lot of heavy, silent thinking, make no mistake."

"Meaning what? How do you know that?" Beesley asked.

Lake said, "I've been talking with them," and Captain Paul Bradshaw reached for another handful of peanuts and smiled.

All hands finally bedded down under the wide wings of the Liberator, but the driver ants discovered all that white meat, and the owners of same quickly retreated to the hot, mosquito-infested interior of the ship and sweated out the long black hours therein.

When dawn came, they discovered that some of the local natives had returned from

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the brush; and a few of them had a fair understanding of the West African French patois. Signor Panti went to work with what limited French he had, and it was, at least, enough to get some of the black boys to work. But the signor's efforts didn't seem to bring any information about any native contacts with the near-civilized world beyond the nearest horizon.

"It's the dangest thing I ever saw," Beesley said. "Maybe we've discovered a new African tribe—the *Africanus Negroidus Vacucanus,* or, as you laymen might say, the vacuum people. They sure seem to be living in a void."

Meantime, with the new day under way, the ship's radioman again tried to reach the outside. He had tried a few times during the evening when the storm had passed, but static and his limited sending range were too-great handicaps. And even now, he had no luck.

"I don't even *get* anything," the radioman reported, "say nothing of having any hopes that they'll be getting me."

"Well, don't let that fret you," Major Beesley said. "It won't be long now before Bathurst sends out some search planes."

Late in the day, Sergeants O'Brien and Pierce returned, and they were empty-handed.

"There's something awful screwy about this whole set-up," Sergeant O'Brien reported, sitting down with a tired flop, after Major Beesley had told him to get the weight off those tired Yank feet. "We found one village—cluster of huts about twice as big as this one. The people were friendly enough, but no-savvy worth a plugged nickel."

"Wouldn't they come in with you?" the major asked.

"No savvy work," said the sergeant. "But there's one ray of hope, sir. We can't be as far back in the high grass as we at first thought. Old man Lend-Lease has reached that village. For a fact, the nig women were doing up their kinky hair with melted butter—good stuff, not rancid—and it was in American lend-lease cans. . . . And to think that my old lady wrote me, only last month, saying that her and the kids haven't had butter since the last time!"

"And that ain't all," Staff Sergeant Pierce added. "On the edge of the village, there were four-five nigs emptying Yank kerosene and gasoline outa five-gallon cans, into a ditch. They wanted the cans to roof a lean-to for the Chief."

"And after all that lend-lease they wouldn't help you?" Beesley asked. "Wouldn't even recognize a couple of good Yanks?"

"If they did, sir, they sure kept it secret," O'Brien said. "You know, Major, I think we're in the Negro state, south of Chad."

"Nigeria?" Beesley speculated. "That would be bad. Being near or west of Chad it bad enough. It's off the Bathurst-Cairo run. But if we're south of Chad, well we're sure out of luck, gentlemen. That is, if we hope to be spotted by searchers from Bathurst, or any of our Allied desert bases. By the way, Rance"—to the navigator—"what was that position you said you worked out for us? Not that I'd want to believe an air navigator on the ground."

RANCE gave a position that placed their location almost due west of Lake Chad. "We're four hundred twenty-three miles west of the northwest tip of Chad," he said, "and that's just about halfway from Chad to the French airfield at Gao, southeast of Timbuktu."

When three days passed, with all labor and no signs of any search planes, Beesley didn't go out of his way to hide his worry. A few more natives had drifted in, perhaps just to see the great man-bird that the grapevine, no doubt, had told them about; but, to a man, they remained to work when Major Lake showed them the right inducements. Of course, by then, the major was going whole-hog and giving away U. S. Air Forces equipment in lieu of ready cash or more trinkets. So the labor went on and on, thickets were grubbed out, ant hills and hummocks leveled, a few fair-sized trees hacked down, and the muddy savanna stretch corduroyed with the palm leaves cut from the trees in the lush cuvette.

But the job was monumental; and the white boys were going down under the terrific heat, poor water, and strange food. By the time the first week had passed, there was absolutely no fun in the situation. On the eighth day, Staff Sergeant Higgenbottom, the radioman, went stark mad, took a hand extinguisher and wrecked the entire radio

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equipment, then went into the brush at a lope. The natives dispatched to bring him back returned hours later, empty-handed.

On the ninth day, Beesley was ready to start the long haul. Three village huts had to be wrecked and removed. All told, there were forty-five workable natives, men, large boys and women. There were no camels in the village, but the head man—he wasn't big enough to rate even the title "Chief," having no store-boughten European shoes—owned two donkeys. These were to be used on the long tow ropes which the natives had fashioned from swamp grass. So all hands and all shoulders and all strong backs were put to the task of horsing the 110 feet of wingspread and thirty tons of deadweight out from the three-way tree-lock in which it had managed to cage itself. Backward and forward, inch by inch, foot by foot, until the lumbering monster was clear of the village and headed down the grubbed-out pathway that led through the long cuvette draw to the sun-baked mudflat where the big try was to be made.

XII

MAJOR LAKE, being in the fiftyish bracket, hadn't been standing up any too well. The same thing went for Signor Panti. Even the better conditioned, hard-bit Air Forces men couldn't stand the gaff. Dengue fever and dysentery was already knocking the very devil out of them. And on the eleventh day two gunner sergeants were folded into engine tarps and buried east of the village; and Beesley turned out all hands just after sunset to close the graves.

On the morning of the twelfth day, after the Liberator had been swung into take-off position at the far end of the mudflat, the party weathered its darkest hour. Major Beesley had put all the natives to work leveling the rough spots on the proposed runway, and the greatest concentration of blacks was about a hundred yards removed from the nose of the ship. Signor Panti, hardly able to be on his feet, was supervising the labor with his smattering of Italian-French jargon. Co-pilot Kincade, holding a straw-matting sunshade over the signor, was dictating the orders which Panti transmitted. Sitting on his heels, too beat-out for much work, the navigator, Rance, was looking on.

Back at the Liberator, O'Brien and Sergeant Pierce were getting the ship in condition, this in view of the fact that Major Beesley had promised that tomorrow would be the day.

The temperature, by the Liberator's thermometer, showed a reading of 144 degrees, and this with the high-grade instrument carefully shaded. So, working in close approximation to all that Liberator's tons of metal, O'Brien and Pierce might just as well have been spending their time in an oven above a real fire. But there was work to be done, and the two had volunteered to get it done.

But Staff Sergeant Pierce broke. And when he did, the young fellow went all the way, hog-wild, stark raving mad.

"They're coming, O'Brien!" the frenzied man yelled, and the other Yanks resting in shaded spots nearby, for a full hundred yards around, all sprang to their feet to see who was coming. "There they are! See 'em? They're on us, O'Brien!"

Major Beesley, Captain Bradshaw and a few others popped out of the official rest-house—now being used as a combination dining-hall and operations office—and Beesley was the first to guess what Pierce had seen, or was seeing.

"Grab that man, O'Brien!" he sang out. "Get him! Knock him down, O'Brien! Stop him, stop him, for God's sake stop that man!"

Sergeant O'Brien, half-sick himself, was too heat-dazed, too sluggish for quick comprehension. But, with Beesley's command, the engineer sergeant quit the engine work in hand and started into the ship not too far behind the running, yelling Pierce.

Staff Sergeant Pierce, once inside, scrambled up till he had the front top-turret guns in hand; but before O'Brien could reach the other man's legs, and yank him down, both .50 caliber guns were spewing their steady chatter of deadly slugs out across the mudflat runway, in among the unsuspecting defenseless native blacks.

SIGNOR PANTI, Kincade and Rance, being closer to the Liberator's nose than the working group, took the assault point-blank and never knew what struck them. All three went down together, under that straw-matting sunshade that Kincade had been

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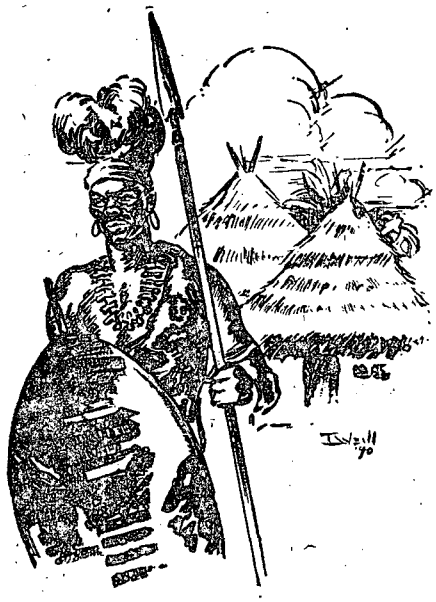
holding. A score or so natives were either dead in the dust, or struggling like stricken animals trying to drag themselves out of danger, and away from something they couldn't quite understand.

O'Brien, trying to call upon a strength he didn't have, put his full weight into the drag on Pierce's legs. The madman just back-kicked and raked O'Brien's face with a heel; and then he was yelling again. "That stops 'em, O'Brien! That gets 'em, man!"

Sergeant O'Brien was still wearing his sidearm, so he mopped the blood of Pierce's kick from his nose and face, shoved the big automatic up under the madman's left arm, then squeezed. And Staff Sergeant Frank Harry Pierce, U. S. A. F., slumped away from his grip on the guns, then came down to fold up at O'Brien's feet, dead in Africa.

When the place went quiet again, all living and wounded blacks had once more taken to the brush. They had left fifteen of their people dead on the mudflat runway strip. And the Americans knew that it was



going to be a long time before any of the native working crew could be induced to return, if at all.

"Come on, airmen, let's bury our dead, and the other man's dead," Major Beesley ordered. "But, first, Sergeants Saterly and Keef, strip all guns of their ammunition. Make damned sure that nothing aboard has a single round left in it. Captain Bradshaw, you'll be in charge of the burials—our own four first."

By five o'clock that afternoon, the burials had been made. Now Beesley had twelve of his original party of twenty. Sitting on his heels in the shade of the big ship, he ran the nervous fingers of a very dirty hand through a mop of unkempt hair atop a troubled head and said, "Gentlemen, we are now on a spot for sure. If we are to get off this clearing, it will be entirely through our own last weak efforts. So we'll knock off now till after sunset, then we'll fall to and give her hell through the night. We've got to get the high spots knocked flat and the low places filled in. Meantime—and I don't need to remind you of this—the natives might be getting together with other villages. Maybe they'll come in a pack and wipe us out."

"Who could blame them?" Rance said. "Good Lord, Major, we couldn't expect the poor devils to understand what happened out there."

"Your plan's all right, Major Beesley," Major Lake said, "and even though I'm not worth a damn myself, we'll see you through. Let's everybody do a flop now and get an hour's rest."

Captain Paul Bradshaw had recently explained Major Lake's purpose in Africa—that is, to Beesley alone—so the man in command turned to Lake and said, "You, Major Lake, get to hell into your hut and keep out of this labor market. And that's an order. You understand, sir?"

"What the devil?" Lake objected. "I'm not an invalid, but if it is an order, then—"

"It is," Major Beesley stated.

"We'll get Signor Panti's belongings in order, Captain," Lake said to young Bradshaw. The pair started toward the hut where Lake and a few others had been living. They had hardly reached the welcome shade of the interior when their attention was arrested by a great commotion, and loud shouting, back there where the rest of the group still sat or slept in the Liberator's shade.

MAJOR BEESLEY seemed to be everyplace, and his voice was shouting orders. "Fire those straw piles!" Lake and Bradshaw first heard him yell. By the time the two had stepped out into the wide sun-baked street, Sergeant O'Brien and some of

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the other soldiers were firing their sidearms into the oil-soaked straw piles that had been prepared for just such an occasion—the sighting of a search plane anywhere in that African sky.

Finally, when the fires were beginning to send up their heavy black smoke, Major Beesley turned to Lake and Bradshaw, pointed into the north and sang out: "Two ships! . . . Is that a sight! . . . Gentlemen, you'd better get your housekeeping caught up. It won't be long now. Yes, sir, by hell, it won't be long now!"

THE two distant planes were beginning to show signs that the Liberator had been sighted. They had changed their direction of flight, and were now heading toward the jumping, dancing, shouting wild men on the mudflat. But, of a sudden, all the joy sort of oozed out of the Yanks, turning to sudden doubt and dire apprehension. The ship silhouettes, now that they were closer, weren't just right.

"Them's Heinkel One-twelves!" Sergeant Bass, a gunner from the British desert assignment, warned. "Surer 'n hell, them's Huns, comin' down from one of them German-French bases. . . . Let's get t'hell outa here! Man the guns! . . . Oh-oh, no ammunition aboard. Saterly! Hey, Keef! Where'd you guys put that ammo?"

But the two oncoming single-engine fighters were now nose-down and boring in at a speed better than 350 miles per hour; and the distance between their guns and the Liberator was just a minus item that was going to be canceled out long before anybody could make a move—say nothing of securing and feeding ammunition to guns.

However, everybody made a dive for the metal protection afforded by the big bomber. That was a bad move, but there was no other choice.

Both Germans came down strafing, each with his four set guns blinking in the evening sky; and when they had made that first pass, zoomed and turned, then circled for a quick return, the Yank giant was beginning to burn. And Major Beesley's men were either dead, dying or making a mighty effort to drag each other out from under that great spread of hot metal—pretty much the same as those poor bewildered natives had departed the mudflat.

But the Heinkel 112s were also carrying their full load of wing bombs—six 22-pounders under the wings of each craft. On the second pass at the Liberator, each ship turned its full cargo loose. When that deadly cargo hit, there was nothing left of the Yank bomber or the men who, just a few minutes before, had danced with joy. Major Beesley had been with his men. He went out with his men.

XIII

MAJOR LAKE and Captain Bradshaw had picked the nearest mud wall and dived behind it for safety with Sergeant Bass' first loud warning of Heinkel 112s, so the pair were still alive—and now entirely alone—when the two Hun pilots made their last observation turn of the scene and once more headed northwestward. But a few of the 22-pound bombs had overshot the Liberator target.

They had hit in among the small straw-thatched huts of the village; and by the time Lake and Bradshaw got to their feet, the whole settlement was a burning torch in the gathering dusk.

Quickly, they cleared their own hut of their few personal possessions before it too went into the red. After that, for an hour or more, they worked silently and hopelessly, gathering up and burying the few recognizable remnants of men. There wasn't much to be buried, and when the light from the burning village began to dim down, along toward nine o'clock, Major Lake suggested that they move out.

Consulting a map, he said, "I believe O'Brien was just about right—about this location being southwest of Lake Chad, and possibly in Nigeria. I think we'll do well to play that lend-lease hunch and travel south or southwest from here. If we're right about this, it might be four or five hundred miles to the coast, and it's British. If we move west, we might face two thousand miles of bad going, and, worst yet, we don't know for sure whether it's French or German country now. If it's Nigeria, we should hit the Niger or at least some of these many towns. But at any rate, we've got to get going. No use risking what these natives might be planning for us right now. Well, are we ready?"

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Taking the few flashlights remaining from the ship's equipment, strapping on their sidearms and packing a little food, they went southwestward into the night. It was tough going, terrifying for men who knew so little of such travel, but to remain in that place of death would have been even tougher. Major Lake, though, was no man for the trail; and when morning began to spread itself across the eastern sky, Captain Paul Bradshaw was all but carrying his superior officer. Bradshaw, though, realized that he must steel himself to that, for he had to get the man with the recording mind through to the coast. So the fight had to go on, on through that long day without rest, then into another night with just a little layoff for a fitful, half-awake cat nap or two, then on and on till neither man knew whether he was going or coming, afoot or on horseback, and cared less. At first, they had tried to avoid all signs of native villages, and the talking drums had seemed to follow them all through the first night. Jackals and hyenas skulked their line of trek by night, and vultures circled their passage by day. Driver ants and a million other crawling, flying devils kept them from restful sleep, when they tried to nap, and fear and doubt of the water and natural food along the march prevented them from eating. When there were no longer talking drums in the brush, they still spent long hours of circling travel, by way of keeping clear of all habitation, until, as they figured, a few-days' travel might get them beyond the area of talking-drum danger. But when two nights and two full days had passed, they were unable to come upon any villages. Yet they had to go on, forcing thickets, fording streams, heat-and-thirst crazed by day, fearful and beset by night.

Major Lake's chief task, and only hope, was to keep the direction right, as they had started, southwestward. Toward that coast.

All other tasks were Captain Paul Bradshaw's: finding food, keeping them moving, chancing drinking water now and then, fighting off jackal and hyena when the coward quit those beasts long enough to tempt them in close to the failing prey, and, more and more often, the actual carrying of Major Lake.

In time, they stopped counting days.

XIV

AFTER playing the Porto Rican bases, then the air posts on St. Lucia and Antigua, the USO show, billing the Thornton Sisters, Irene and Inez, moved on and finally reached the Yank establishments along the hump of Brazil. October and November payed out, and during December, for a few weeks, they were in Recife. On the Sunday afternoon when the word came through that Pearl Harbor had been hit, the troupe was playing the big air base; all in all, it wasn't much of a show, what with a lump in the audience's throat and a radio loudspeaker cutting in to retell each new, heart-breaking detail of the Jap treachery.

The Axis declaration of war, had a quick, devastating effect on the little USO unit. Right away, the three men of the troupe decided to put up the right hand and take on the uniform, right there in Recife. Next day, Mary Fay announced that she was marrying a U. S. Air Forces sergeant, and staying right there in Recife. On Wednesday, Elizabeth Anderson told the world that she was marrying a Brazilian, a coffee planter, and staying right there in Recife. So that left only the Thorntons and Ida Maple, and they agreed that they didn't care to stay right there in Recife, not when the U. S. A., way up there in the north, was going to war.

"Ye gods," Irene Thornton said, "this leaves the Thorntons holding the bag, and I do mean Ida Maple."

Ida, the loudest of the group, said, "I can take a hint. But you're darned right—you're stuck with me. Say, how about making your act The Three Thorntons?"

"Lord forbid!" said Inez Thornton. "Have a heart, Ida."

The USO director, Recife, had a heart. He tied Ida onto a unit flying to Africa, and, the same day, notified the Thorntons that they were wanted back in the big time. There was a new War Bond sales campaign coming up, and USO headquarters, Washington, was calling in its top headline acts from all the circuits. The Thornton Sisters, Irene and Inez, were top billing on any circuit.

WHEN they reported at Air Transport Command for shipment north, the Thorntons were introduced to the crew of

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the plane, a Captain Early, Lieutenant Stone and Sergeant Flower.

"Seems to me," Irene laughed, "we've met before."

"Could be," Early kidded. "Stone, do you dig these ladies? Have we met them some place—say, on some guy's knee?"

"Seems yes," Stone agreed. "Wasn't it on the knee of a pair of pink pants? . . . Gent name of Bradshaw, and how I hated the guy.

"Foul!" Irene called. "There was no knee action. At least, not for me."

Inez blushed. "Nor for me!" she blurted out. "But Captain Bradshaw was swell."

"Right you are—a swell," Stone admitted. "You knew who he was, of course?"

"Sure. He told me, on the side," Inez admitted. "He was a cadet from Randolf Field, and not a captain at all."

"Ye gods!" Stone wailed. "A cadet! The gent is only heir, sole heir, to the Bradshaw Interests, Inc., unlimited, etc., etc., period."

Inez was still unimpressed. "He was almost ready for basic training," she said. "He was nice. Where did you leave him, Captain?"

"Cairo," Early told them. "We were assigned to the Cairo-China run, so had to say good-bye to Lake and Bradshaw. We flew two trips over the hump. Then Washington decided that this half of the world couldn't get along without us, so we were reassigned to this command. We just got in from Africa yesterday. And right away, luck breaks like nobody's business, and we get those lovely Thorntons as passengers—with no pink-pants top man to fade our dice. So you're riding all the way with us, eh? Happy days!"

"Let's get out to that bus of ours, Skipper," Lieutenant Stone suggested. "We'd better be all set to hit it on the tail when Operations gives us the word. This time we'll tell these Thorntons about us, and woe betide the guy who shows up to draw our fires or pull our fangs."

Out on the flight line before Operations, Early had already started his engines, and the minute of departure was close at hand, with all aboard. The ground crew, standing by, was watching a Navy Catalina approaching from the east. A Cat in flight is always a nice-enough thing to hold any airman's attention. This was a PBY-5A Cat, an amphibian job, and she was lowering her wheels for a setdown on the Army field. It doesn't often happen.

An Operations captain, with a Navy lieutenant just behind him, came through the gate, waved a radiogram up toward Early, and sang out, "Hold 'er, Captain Early!"

Lieutenant Stone had been standing alongside Early, talking backward into the cabin—to the Thorntons. Now Stone shoved a listening ear over Early's right shoulder as the captain hung out the side window to hear what Operations had on its mind.

"Hold 'er for this Cat's landing," he Operations captain said. "She's bringing in a couple of rush cases, sick men. Two boys who were picked up by the British on the west coast of Africa."

SOMEHOW or other, Captain Early seemed to guess. Stone did, too, for he sucked in his breath with a surprised hiss.

"Got any names on that radiogram, Cap?" Early asked.

"Sure, let's see," Operations said. "A Major Lake and a Captain Paul Bradshaw. Never heard of them, but they're A. A. F. men—it says here, as they say on the radio. . . . Okay, we'll get 'em aboard, Captain."

The Cat was on the ground. And the ground-crew men were waving it in toward the waiting transport.

Lieutenant Stone, on his way to the port-side passenger door, stopped near the Thorntons long enough to say, "Well, so long, girls."

"What! You quitting the ship, Lieutenant?" Irene asked.

"No. But the gent with the pink pants is climbing aboard. The Bradshaw cadet has arrived from Africa. . . . Oh, Sergeant Flower! Get a dash of reviving cold water out of the cooler for Miss Inez Thornton. . . . Make it snappy, sarge. The little lady is going to do a faint. . . .

"Aw, what's the use of even trying!"

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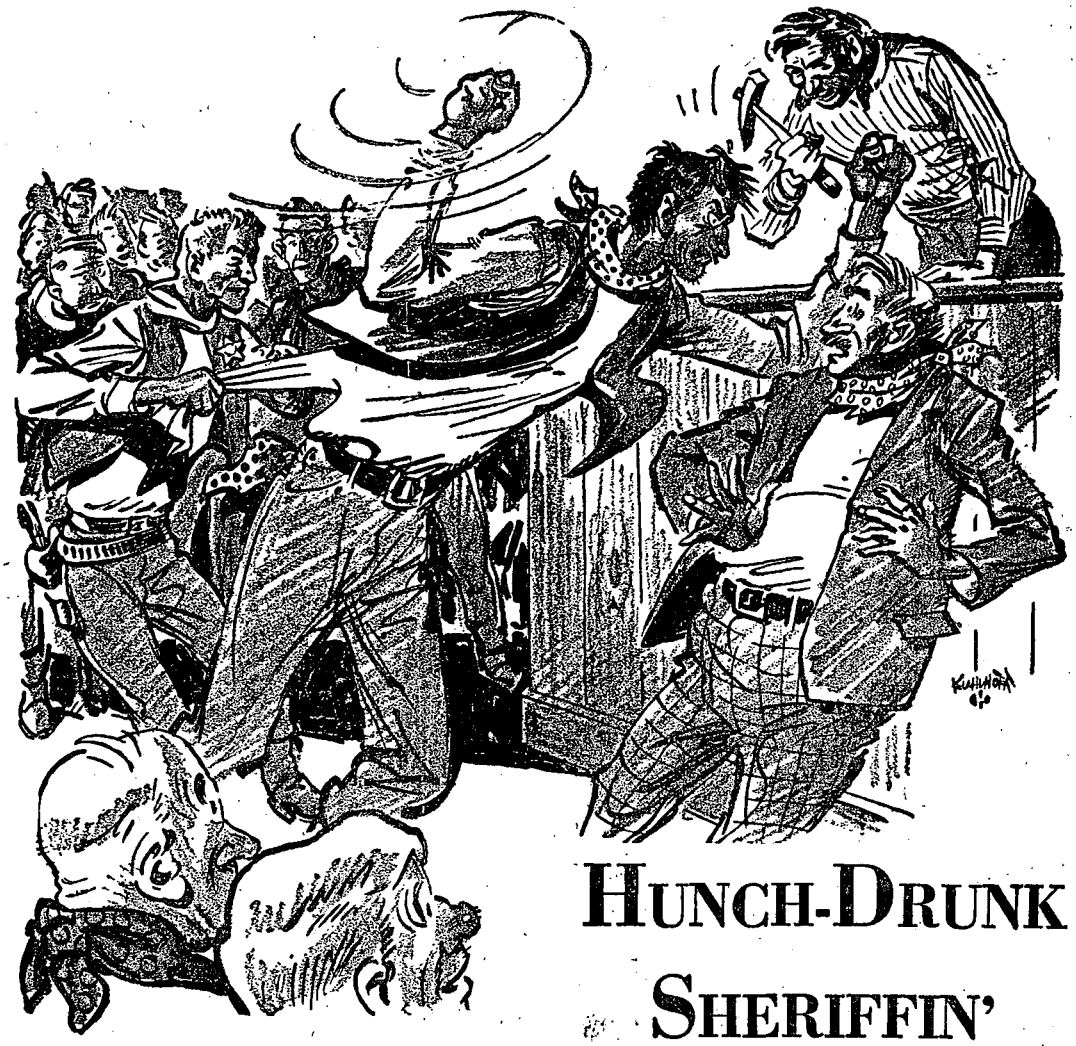
"When Monkeying with the Law, It Pays to Keep Your Forked End Down . . . "



HUNCH-DRUNK SHERIFFIN'

By S. OMAR BARKER

IN Justice of the Peace Chawgood Osborn's court the preliminary hearing of a charge of cattle theft and brand-burning against a weatherbeaten, wild-eyed, long-jawed wolf-trapper called Lookaway Abbott was under way. The defendant, unshaven, unshorn and mad as a teased horny toad, was on the witness stand in his own defense, and Sheriff Hunch McElroy was having one skeboozit of a time keeping his profane but pious prisoner from shouting the house down and uprooting his own tireless tonsils in the process.

It should here be noted that "Chawgood," "Lookaway" and "Hunch" were not appellations that judge, prisoner and sheriff had brought with them from their cradles. Judge Osborn had been forty-odd years a prospector whose richest strike had netted him just enough to finance a full set of store teeth with which he claimed he couldn't bite

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worth a doodlebug's damn, but could sure chaw good.

Of Lookaway Abbott, old Hunch had once remarked that all he did was to sing, cuss and go to camp meetin'. Except for trapping the scanty catch of wolves and coyotes that earned him his meager living, that was about the size of it. Noted as the outcussin'-est hombre in Pintada County, he was nevertheless religious, and habitually used up in singing hymns whatever wind he had left over from cussing. The hymn he sang the most, probably because he could bellow it loudest, was that old-time rouser that begins: *"Lookawa-ay from the Cross to the glittering crown! From your cares, weary one, look awa-ay!"*

Hunch McElroy, about the size and build of a warped willow switch and as brown and shrivelled-looking as a dried apple, had been sheriff of Pintada County for as many years as a horny toad has warts. During that time it was said he had caught a lot more lawbreakers by following his hunches than by more orthodox methods. Whether his so-called hunches were really responsible or whether he was just one of those rare officers who seem to have been shotgunned in the rump with luck, was a matter of some disagreement. Among his few enemies and those who opposed his reelection for a variety of other reasons, "hunch-drunk sheriffin'," as they called it, was a matter for loud derision. Even his own two young deputies, Bug-Eye Waters and Rusty Paulsen, figgered he sometimes carried the hunch business a little too damn far.

Lookaway Abbott was perhaps too loose jointed of mind as well as tongue to harbor a sustained personal enmity for long against anybody, but lately he had openly condemned the banty sheriff as a dambusted, weasel-nosed meddler, because Hunch had given his tail a sharp warning twist for trying to collect New Mexico bounty on a wolf scalp taken across the line in Arizona.

"Dambust it all to the hot places!" Lookaway had exploded. "Jest because a guddle-muddy lobo happens to drift over into Arizony ain't no dambusted sign he won't drift back an' kill cows in New Mexico, is it?"

Sheriff McElroy had admitted the logic of his argument. "But the law says you got to kill your wolves in New Mexico to collect New Mexico bounty," he had added. "An' I got a hunch you'll land in jail for fraud if you keep on tryin' to dodge it."

A FEW nights later, probably just to show how dambusted independent he was, Lookaway Abbott had picked an old cottonwood log across the street from the sheriff's house on which to sit and bellow forth hymns at three o'clock in the morning. He had straddled his horse and run like a rabbit when Hunch came out in his nightshirt to shut him up, putting on even more speed when the exasperated little sheriff fired a couple of shots at the moon to scare him.

"Rides a purty fast hoss for an ol' coyote-peeler," Hunch had remarked to Bug-Eye the next morning. "I got a hunch that ol' ripsnorter's goin' to land in jail yet."

Now Lookaway had not only landed in jail, but was up in court for Judge Chawgood Osborn to determine whether he should be bound over to the district court on a charge a dambusted lot more serious than sneaking in a stray wolf scalp on his bounty list. For the only thing worse than stealing livestock in those rusty-necked days was getting caught at it.

Yesterday Doss Larrover, foreman of the B E D and an F F L puncher named Chalky Johnson, had marched old Lookaway in ahead of their pistols with a fresh-skinned yearling hide tied on back of his saddle. They had sworn out a criminal complaint that caused Sheriff McElroy to furnish Lookaway Abbott with free lodging in jail—which, Hunch surmised, was "Better'n he was used to."

The thoroughly frightened old trapper's story, with some of the dambusts, I-tell-yuh-b'gods, and wild gestures boiled out of it, was about like this: He had been scouting for wolf sign on Skidpole Mesa when he happened to spy a way-off trickle of smoke. Thinking it might be some other dambusted trapper setting up camp in his territory, he rode out to the rim to take a better look. From that vantage point, though his eyesight wasn't as powerful as it "yoosened" to be, he had seen what looked to him like "goin's on"—a cowboy, a horse, a small fire and a hogtied critter that looked too big for a calf.

"Did this hombre see you?" asked Judge Osborn.

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"I never asked him if he did or not," snapped Lookaway sarcastically. "But it looked to me like he climbed his cayuse and lit a shuck outa there too guddlemuddy fast to be honest. Then I seen another feller I hadn't saw before lope down off one of them bald nob hills like he was takin' after him—an' they both disapeert. First off, I figgered it wasn't none of my dambusted business. Then I recollected hearin' that ol' Frank Leeds of the F F L an' ol' Brad Bedford of the B E D had got together an' was offerin' a hundred dollars reward for information that'd put 'em on the trail of whoever's been burnin' F F L brands over into B E D's, so I thinks to myself, thinks I—"

"Hold on a dodgasted minute," broke in Judge Chawgood Osborn, clacking his store teeth. "You tryin' to tell me that Brad Bedford is fool enough to feenance a reward on a feller for helpin' him increase his own cattle?"

"That's right, Judge!" Clear-clipped and self-confident, big Brad Bedford gave his own answer from the back of the crowded little courtroom. "I got tired of being accused of hiring cow thieves—always indirectly, of course. I got tired of Leeds using the fact that F F L can be readily burned over into a B E D as an excuse for his saddle-pounders to come nosing around on my range, pretending to look for strays. So I authorized our most able county sheriff to put me down for whatever amount in reward money that Leeds would match. I was willing to make my half $500, but since Leeds was too stingy to put up more than $50, that's what we—"

"Stingy hell!" The meager-meated figure of Frank F. Leeds rose from a heel-squat near the side window. "The reason I could not afford to put up no more," he drawled, "was because them B E D buzzards been stealin' me blind. I used to figger we had us a sheriff smart enough to put a stop to it, but I reckon he never did git jest the right hunch!"

There was a scattering of guffaws, to which Sheriff McElroy paid not the slightest attention, but which died down very suddenly when Bug-Eye Waters bulged to his feet just inside the rail and gave a hitch to his gun holster. Bug-Eye may have been a little short on the analytical brains said to be needed by a good law officer, but he was plenty long on loyalty to Hunch McElroy and the ability to put a six-gun bullet wherever he wanted it—and quick.

"Order in this here court!" he scowled. "Or I'll run ever' dad-blasted one of yuh out on the street!"

"You shut up an' set down!" commanded Judge Chawgood severely. "When I want order I'll holler for it. Now, lemme see—where was we at?"

"The prizner," volunteered Doss Larrover, foreman of the B E D, "was just fixin' to explain how come us to ketch him in the act of cow stealin'."

"That's right, Judge." Brad Bedford shoved his way to the front. "Why this hymn-singing coyote skinner should want to burn my brand on other people's cattle I don't pretend to know—unless with his limited brain power he figgered it would somehow help cover up his own thieving. But now that we've caught him, your honor, I just want to say that I'm willing to spend the rest of that $500 I mentioned to see that this sneaking cow thief is convicted and sent to the pen where he belongs!"

Lookaway Abbott's long gauntness suddenly unfolded itself from the witness chair. "You cain't call me no dambusted cow thief, you blubber-gutted ol' son of a whatyuhmacallit! I'll—"

SHERIFF McELROY'S bony grasp caught him by the shirt tail before his windmilling fists could reach their target. Firmly he towed him back to the witness stand.

"Tuck in your shirt an' git on with your rat killin'," he advised in his dry, rusty-barbed-wire voice.

"That's right! Perceed! Perceed!" commanded Judge Chawgood, whamming the plank table a few wallops with the old prospector's hammer that served him in lieu of a gavel.

Looking hostile, sullen and scared all at the same time, Lookaway Abbott obeyed.

"Thinks I to myself, thinks I," he continued, "supposin' I was to win that there hunderd dollars, I could lay off trappin' an' pizenin' varmints for a spell an' do a little dambusted preachin' an' hymn singin' here an' thar where it's most needed. I tell yuh b'god, the sin in these parts—"

"Never mind about the sin," advised

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Hunch. "What about this calf hide you got caught with?"

"You're jest as sinful as the next 'un, Hunch McElroy!" The prisoner eyed him balefully. "But if you think you kin railroad a God-fearin' man like me to the pen fer stealin', you're—"

"I ain't a railroad man," said Hunch dryly. "Git on with your testimony."

WITH a sort of sullen defiance that betrayed his fear, Lookaway obeyed. Among some cattle near where he had seen the fire, he said, he had found a fat red heifer bearing a fresh-burned B E D brand that looked to him as if it might have been a workover job. What he first figured to do was to drive the heifer over to the F F L for evidence, then take Leeds or the sheriff or somebody and put them on the tracks of the man he had seen riding away from the scene so fast. No, he couldn't identify either the man or the horse, which he thought was a dark bay or brown or maybe dun, on account of the dambusted distance. But he was used to reading tracks, and both the man's boot tracks and the horse tracks left tell-tale clues. One of the man's bootheels had left the print of a metal plate such as is sometimes tacked on to help straighten up a runover heel. And the horse tracks were plumb unusual, showing the animal shod behind but barefoot in front.

However, he hadn't been able to drive the heifer, so he decided to rope her and tie her up to a tree. But that didn't work either.

"You ride a mighty fast horse for a wolf-trapper," observed Hunch at this point. "How come he couldn't ketch up with a yearlin'?"

"Oh, I caught her all right, but my dambusted rope busted. By that time I was gittin' purty frothy. I was afeerd if I left the heifer there loose, the thief might come back whilst I was huntin' up the law an' chouse her off somewheres to a hidey place. Then I recollected hearin' how you was supposened to be able to tell fer dambusted sure whether a brand was burnt over or not by peelin' the hide off an' lookin' at the meat side of it. So I tell yuh b'god, I jest shot that there dambusted heifer, skun her out, hung the meat up on a juniper, tied the dambusted hide on the back of my saddle fer evidence an' headed out to report to the law. I tell yuh b'god, I figgered if I could jest win that there reward, I'd—"

"Yeah, you told us," broke in Hunch. "Then what happened?"

"What happened? You know dambusted well what happened!" Lookaway pointed a long shaky finger at Doss Larrover and the F F L cowhand named Chalky Johnson, seated in the front row. "Them two guddle-muddy cut-throats come along an' yamped me for a dambusted cow thief. Pistol p'inted me right into town an' you throwed me in jail, you dambusted ol' horny toad! Looky here, Hunch—" his tone became pleading—"An' you, too, Chawgood—you ain't goin' to railroad a pore dambusted God-fearin' man like me off to the pen fer somethin' I never done, are ye?"

"Your Honor," said Brad Bedford, stepping his neatly groomed, portly self inside the rail, "may I suggest that whether the defendant is God-fearing or not has nothing to do with it! Even if this fantastic lie he has cooked up were true, still—"

"Who you callin' a liar?" Once more Lookaway rose to offer battle to his accuser, and once more Hunch's firm grip on his shirt tail held him back, but without hushing him up. "If you think I ain't tellin' the truth, whyn't you ride out there an' take a look for yourself, Hunch? You, too, Chawgood, an' the whole dambusted court? I can even tell you which juniper the carkiss is hangin' on. I'll show you the sure 'nough thief's boot an' hoss tracks! I'll—"

"Your honor," broke in Bedford firmly, "I maintain that all this is irrelevant, because—"

"Huh?" frowned Judge Osborn. "What's an elephant got to do with it?"

"He never said 'er elephant,' Chawgood," Hunch explained with a little less than half a grin. "He said 'irrelevant,' meanin' *'lex non scripta'* as you lawyers an' judges put it."

"Well, that there's different," said Chawgood, clicking his false teeth sternly. "But why the hell didn't he say so? What else you got on your mind, Brad?"

"If, in the absence of the prosecuting attorney, I may be allowed to speak, your Honor, I'd like to say that it doesn't matter *why* the defendant killed the heifer. He was found in illegal possession of the fresh

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hide of an animal that didn't belong to him. If this court is convinced of that fact, it is your duty to bind him over for trial by the District Court on a charge of theft!"

"Oh, I'm convinced all right," agreed Chawgood, "an' I aim to sock him with all I got. So if there ain't none of the rest of you jaspers got anything hot you want to pop off about, this here court will perceed to—"

"Hold your hosses a second, Judge," drawled old Frank Leeds without rising from his heel-squat by the window. "I ain't frettin' much about an ol' wolf-trapper beefin' a critter of mine once in a while. But I've looked at that hide, an' it's a damn neat burnt over job. What I want to find out is who's doin' that class of hot iron work on my cattle."

"Hell, we got him right here, ain't we?" expostulated the Judge.

"Certainly you've got him!" agreed Brad Bedford. "And as soon as the District Court convicts him, we'll pay Doss and Chalky the reward for catching him. Then maybe Frank Leeds and I can go back to being good neighbors again."

" 'Love thy neighbor as thyself, but keep yore powder dry'," intoned Lookaway in his best preaching voice. "That there's Scripture, Judge, an' I tell yuh b'god—"

"I'm doin' the tellin' in this court," broke in the Judge. "By authority of the law in me duly investigated, I hereby—"

"Chawgood," broke in Sheriff McElroy thoughtfully, "I got a hunch maybe we better go take a look at that carcass after all."

"What for?" shrugged the Judge. "We're goin' to find him guilty anyway, ain't we?"

"Like as not we are. But you're learned in the law, your Honor. You wouldn't want to deny an accused man his rights of *sic semper tyrannis,* would you?"

"Well, o' course that's different." Chawgood made a fair job of wrapping his ignorance up in a cloak of dignity. "When you figger we better start?"

SHERIFF McELROY took time to bat his pale eyes quizzically at Brad Bedford, Frank Leeds, Doss Larrover and Chalky Johnson in turn before replying.

"Well," he said finally, "we couldn't make it out there before dark tonight anyways. I got a hunch we might jest as well wait till mornin'. That suit you gents?"

"Why, sure, Sheriff," said Brad Bedford agreeably. "Doss and I will meet you at the rocky forks of Skidpole Draw—would nine o'clock be too early for you and Chalky to get there, Mr. Leeds?"

"Hell, no," drawled the old cowman. "An' don't call me 'mister!' I'm leakin' out for the ranch as quick as this here court adjourns, an' from there I can git anywheres any time."

"We'll rendezvous at nine then," agreed Hunch. "But there ain't no use you makin' that long ride home, Frank. I'm invitin' you to stay the night with me—if you figger you can put up with my cookin'. My wife's off on a visit, y'know."

"Thanks," said Leeds, "but I reckon I better leak out for the ranch—if it's jest the same to you, Hunch."

"It *ain't* just the same to me, Frank," said Hunch soberly. "When I invite a man to stay all night, he stays all night!"

"Huh? You mean you're aimin' to arrest me?"

"Not if I don't have to, Frank," grinned Hunch. "I just figgered you might like to stay an' play a few rounds of dominoes. I got a hunch you won't regret it."

For a moment the old cowman showed signs of really bristling up. Then he subsided with a shrug.

"Okay," he said finally. "I'll stay, but I'll sure as hell spit on your floor!"

"If there ain't no further business, Sheriff," said Chawgood, "I'm fixin' to adjourn this court. My whistle's gittin' drier'n chalk dust!"

"Hold it just a minute, Judge," said Hunch. "I'd like now to call Bedford, Doss Larrover and Chalky Johnson to the witness stand—all at once."

"All at once?" Brad Bedford looked puzzled. "You can't—"

"Why the hell cain't he?" interposed Judge Chawgood Osborn belligerently. "We got plenty of room. You three gents step up here an' be swore!"

"Gents," said Hunch, when Rusty Paulsen had sworn the three puzzled witnesses, "I'm goin' to ask you all three the same question: how many minutes do you reckon it would take me to step up the street to my office, git somethin' out of my desk an' git back to this here courtroom?"

"I'd say that depends," grinned Doss Lar

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rover, sensing a joke, "on whether the bottle in your desk is already open or not!"

"A joke's a joke, Sheriff," began Brad Bedford, "but I'm a busy man, and—"

"This ain't no joke, Brad," the banty sheriff broke in. "Now here's what I want you to do, all three of you: set right here an' concentrate till I git back—then each one give his honest guess how long it has taken me. Is that clear?"

"Sounds like a lot of dambusted foolishness to me, Hunch," complained the Judge. "My whistle's gittin' drier ever' minute. I think I'll jest overrule you on that, an' adjourn the court!"

"Your Honor," broke in the banty sheriff, respectful as a pet groundhog, "surely you ain't forgittin' the well-known legal principle of *equilibrium tempus fugit?*"

"Damn if I wasn't about to, at that," admitted Chawgood sheepishly. "All right, I'll see that these gents don't look at no watches whilst you're gone—but rattle your hocks! I ain't aimin' to hold court here all evenin'!"

Outside Hunch did not head for his office. Instead he made a quick but sharp inspection of several of the horses dozing at hitchracks up and down the otherwise deserted street. He also examined a few saddles, saddle bags and slickers. When he came back into the courtroom Judge Chawgood Osborn was having a hard time preventing Lookaway Abbott from turning the court into a camp meeting. Brad Bedford guessed the time he had been gone as nine minutes. Doss Larrover put it at twelve and a half, Chalky Johnson at eight. By Rusty Paulsen's watch it was actually seven. Gravely Hunch entered the guesses of the three puzzled witnesses in a little black notebook. Then, with a triumphant wham of his ore-buster gavel, Judge Chawgood Osborn adjourned the court.

Escorting his despondent prisoner back to jail, Hunch loitered, swapping banter with nearly everybody along the street. He paused to lean a moment against the hitchrack where Doss Larrover was just mounting his stocky bay horse.

"How you makin' out courtin' that nester gal over on Badger Flat, Doss?" he inquired casually. "Fixin' to use your reward money for a wedding, or ain't she fattened up enough to suit you yet?"

Doss Larrover grinned, but something like a curtain seemed to drop over his eyes. "Ain't collected no reward yet, Sheriff," he said noncommittally.

As soon as they stepped inside his office Lookaway Abbott turned despondently to the little sheriff. "Hunch," he said, "who the dambusted side are you on in this here dogfight, anyhow?"

"The law's side—I hope," replied Hunch dryly. "Why?"

"I dunno," shrugged Lookaway. "I mean on account of me whoopin' 'er up in front of your house that night, I was afeered you—"

The entrance of old Frank Leeds and Hunch's two young deputies interrupted him. The old cowman was plainly exasperated.

"Hunch, you're half idiot an' two-thirds fool!" he growled. "While you hold me in here playin' damn fool dominoes tonight, somebody's goin' to be disposin' of that carcass!"

"Which is what you were aimin' to do yourownself, huh, instid of ridin' home?"

"No, by gollies! But I *was* aimin' to be layin' out in the brush thereabouts in case somebody else did!"

"An' git yourself shot," said Hunch dryly. "What you figger can be proved by a peeled carcass anyhow—even if there is one—except whether ol' Lookaway's lyin'? Without no moon, you couldn't see nobody to recognize 'em anyhow. Furthermore, just between you, me, us an' nobody else, I'm aimin' to send Rusty out there as soon as he can slip out without bein' noticed, jest to kinder keep an eye on things."

"Yeah—an' like as not git him shot, too!"

"That's different," said Hunch. "Runnin' risks is the lawman's business!"

RUSTY PAULSEN, as it turned out, did not even reach the alleged heifer carcass in Skidpole Draw. Neither did he get shot, but his horse did—smack out from under him. Sheriff McElroy, Bug-Eye, Frank Leeds, Chawgood, and half a dozen others who came along with the court out of curiosity, met him the next morning less than ten miles out of town, hopping toward town with a dislocated ankle—and hopping mad. After parties unknown had ambushed him and shot his horse soon after dark last night, it had taken him hours to

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work his bruised right leg free from the weight of his dead mount, and the rest of the night to travel the five miles he had come, so far. No, he had no clues at all as to who had waylaid him. But from the flash of shots he judged it was one man with a rifle.

"I told yuh you ort to sent me," complained Bug-Eye.

"If he had we'd be fixin' to hold your funeral," retorted Rusty. "That booger was loaded for bear—an' you've got a full inch more bone on top of your head than I have." He exhibited the hole where a bullet had zipped through his hat practically at the hair line.

"That," averred Bug-Eye, "is what yuh git fer settin' so damn straight in the saddle. Now if it'd been me—"

"Never mind, boys," cut in Hunch dryly. "Bug-Eye, your hoss'll carry double. Git Rusty on in to a doctor."

"But supposin' this travellin' courthouse runs into gun-fightin' trouble?" protested Bug-Eye. "What you goin' to do without me?"

"Same as I did before you was born, I reckon," said Hunch. "Throw a rock at 'em an' run like hell!"

ON THE way Hunch and his party picked up Chalky Johnson and at the forks of Skidpole Draw they met Brad Bedford, Doss Larrover and a couple more BED cowboys, as agreed.

"By gollies," bragged Judge Osborn, "when I hold court I sure do draw a crowd, don't I? Lead on, Lookaway! Where at's that heifer carcass we've brung the court out here to view?"

"Jest a little piece up that dambusted left fork," growled the prisoner. "Next time maybe you'll believe a feller without all this guddlemuddy monkey business!"

But when they reached the spot to which Lookaway led them, there was no carcass. Neither were there any ashes or other signs of a branding fire. Horse tracks there were in plenty, and tracks of broad-heeled boots such as Lookaway wore. But there were no discernible tracks of any horse shod only in the rear, nor of any bootheel with a metal plate on it. The only thing to indicate that a beef had been killed and skinned out here was a splotch of dried blood. The scrawny sheriff's face wore a look of quizzical puzzlement.

"Lookaway," he said, "I thought you said there was a carcass here."

"Dambust it, there was!" snorted Lookaway. "Somebody's been an'—"

"These horse tracks," Hunch broke in on him. "You recognize any of 'em, Lookaway?"

The tormented wolf-trapper hesitated. He gulped audibly, his eyes darting around as if seeking an avenue of escape.

"All right, dambust it!" he shrugged finally. "These is the tracks of my own dambusted ponies. But I never—"

"You mean you've got other horses besides the nag you're riding?" inquired Brad Bedford.

"None of your dambusted business!" snorted Lookaway. "But I have. Two of 'em. Both pigeon-toed, an' these here is their tracks, but—"

"It begins to look," said Brad Bedford, in his calm, impersonal manner, "as if a certain cow thief was lying on the witness stand yesterday, don't it?"

"Shore does," agreed Hunch, scratching his head. "In fact, the signs all point to him havin' butchered him a beef here sometime yesterday, packed the meat off some place, then cooked up that story about seein' somebody brandin' a heifer, *after* he got caught with the hide. What do you make of it, Chawgood?"

"Who, me? Hell, ain't I told you all the time ol' Lookaway's as guilty as godfrey, without all this fanoodlin'?"

"You're a dambusted liar!" shouted Lookaway wildly. "All of you, lyin' yourselves black in the face jest to send a dambusted, innercent, God-fearin' man to prison! I tell yuh b'god, Hunch, if the law won't pertect a man, he's shore as Hades got to pertect hisself!"

The sudden grab he made for Hunch's six-shooter almost succeeded, but not quite. Nimble as a cat, the banty sheriff whirled, stuck out a foot and gave Lookaway a combination trip and shove that sent him sprawling, then calmly helped him up.

"When monkeyin' with the law, my good Christian friend," he advised dryly, "it pays to keep your forked end down! How much beef you got hid out at your camp?"

"Nary a guddlemuddy smell!" snorted

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Lookaway. "If you don't believe me, whyn't you ride over an' take a look for your dam-busted self?"

The banty sheriff scratched his head again. He tugged at his long gray mustache. He batted his pale eyes in puzzlement.

"Judge," he said, "I suggest it would be sage jurisprudence to continue our reconnaissance for the corpus delicti at the defendant's domicile."

"You taken the words right out of my gullet," agreed Chawgood.

WELL hidden behind a mask of wild gooseberry bushes, under an over-lip of cliff a few yards from Lookaway Abbott's camp they found four quarters of fresh beef. It had been wallowed around some and it showed the rope marks of packing, but it had plainly been slaughtered within the past day or two.

Hunch gave vent to an unhappy sigh. "It looks like we got the goods on you, Lookaway," he said. "Judge, convene the court while I take this here stubborn-headed prisoner to one side an' see if he ain't about ready to plead guilty an' throw hisself on the mercy of the court!"

Wrapping himself in a highly invisible cloak of dignity, Judge Chawgood Osborn seated himself on a rock at the head of a litle open flat a few yards down the draw.

"Same as in a reg'lar courtroom," he admonished.

Good humoredly, except for old Frank Leeds, they all swung down from their horses, dropped the reins and grouped themselves in front of him. After a moment of whispering with Doss Larrover, Chalky Johnson rose from his heel-squat and raised his right arm: "Now, altogether, boys!" he announced with a wide grin. "Three cheers fer Chawgood Osborn, the best dambusted judge in the county!"

Chawgood acknowledged the salute with what he considered a most judicial bow. "Thanky, boys. You can always count on ol' Chawgood—any time you ketch a cow thief, jest fetch him to me an' I'll shove him on towards the pen like he deserves!"

"Your honor," said Brad Bedford, "I see that our most able sheriff is now approaching with the prisoner, but before he gets here I have a word to say to my neighbor, right out where you all can hear it."

He strode over to where old Frank Leeds still sat on his horse, and put out his hand. "Frank, you've accused me of hiring men to steal your cattle. But I don't aim to hold it against you. Now that the real thief has been caught, why can't we be good neighbors—and let bygones be bygones!"

The old cowman ignored the hand, turned his head, spat, said nothing, and kept on saying it as Hunch marched his slump-shouldered prisoner up before the "court."

"Judge an' gents," said the banty sheriff, more gravely than he often spoke, "it looks like this here is a seriouser matter than any of us figgered. When we looked at that meat, maybe you all noticed that the heart an' liver was missin'. Now I want to ask you: what would you think of a daggoned ol' wolf-trapper that would go off an' leave a whole, nice, fresh beef liver hangin' in a juniper, *loaded plumb full of coyote pizen?* 'Course, all he was aimin' to do was kill a few magpies an' ravens on account of them sometimes springin' his wolf traps. But supposin' some hungry cowpoke had come along, an'—"

AT THE word "pizen" Doss Larrover and Chalky Johnson suddenly exchanged startled looks. Now Larrover was on his feet, reaching for his horse, so fast that he was already in the saddle before old Hunch could draw his gun.

"Hold on a minute, Doss!" Hunch called out. "What's your hurry?"

But Doss didn't wait, and after a second's hesitation, Chalky Johnson hit the saddle to follow him. Hunch raised his six-gun, then lowered it without firing.

"Too far an' too fast," he grunted. He turned to the Judge. "Yonder goes your cow thieves, Chawgood—but I got a hunch they ain't goin' very far!"

As if he had suddenly changed his mind, Hunch now fired three shots in the general direction of the two cowboys speeding down the draw, sputting up dust far behind them! Two shots quick, then after a ten-second pause, the third. In the distance his keen old eyes had spied a dust coming up the draw, and he had a pretty good hunch who it was.

To Bug-Eye Waters, hurrying to rejoin his chief after taking care of Rusty Paul-

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sen, the three shots were a long-familiar signal that trouble was afoot. Bug-Eye's was no master-brain, but when he met two riders coming down the draw in too big a hurry, he went into action. Presently Hunch and the rest of them met him, pistol-herding Doss Larrover and Chalky Johnson up the trail ahead of him. Doss's gun hand was bullet-shattered, and Chalky was bleeding through the shoulder of his shirt. There was a frantic look on Larrover's face, and he was swearing wildly.

"Damn it, you got to let me go, Sheriff!" he cried. "I got to git over to Badger Flat before Josie an' her folks eat any of that pizened liver!"

"I had a hunch you'd been courtin' that nester gal with fresh meat," said Hunch dryly. "But next time you try plantin' a stolen beef on a pore ol' iggerunt trapper, maybe you better leave the liver right with it. How long have you an' Chalky been brand-burnin' ol' man Leeds' cattle, Doss? Or ain't you ready to admit it?"

For half a second Larrover's lips tightened stubbornly, then his defiance crumpled.

"I'm ready to admit ever'thing, Sheriff!" he groaned. "Only for God's sake, let me go warn Josie before she—"

"Anybody hire you to do all this rustlin'?"

Brad Bedford's hand began inching toward his gun. Doss's quick look at him was full of hatred—and defiance.

"You're damn right there was, Sheriff! Brad knowed I had a prison record, an' he put the screws on me. He—God's sake, watch him, Hunch!"

Hunch had not needed the warning. Already his six-shooter had covered Brad Bedford's draw. "Git his gun for me, Lookaway!"

"I'll be dambusted!" squawked Lookaway, and got the gun. "You mean I ain't prisoner no more? Whyn't you tell me you was on my dambusted side? Whyn't you—"

But Hunch had no time for such questions. Doss Larrover's anxiety over the possible poisoning of his girl and her family by the treat of fresh beef liver he had taken them, had made a wild man out of him.

"Take it easy, Doss," said Hunch dryly. "That liver wasn't pizened. I just had a hunch it might spook you into givin' yourself away if I said so—which you shore 'nough done. Who done that shootin' at Rusty Paulsen last night?"

What Doss Larrover had to say about Brad Bedford for trying to involve him in a murder was wholly unprintable.

"One thing about a few years in the pen, Doss," observed the banty sheriff, "maybe it'll cure you of swearin' enough to make that nester gal a passable husband when you git out." He turned to Judge Chawgood Osborn. "Judge, I hereby file charges against Doss Larrover an' Chalky Johnson for plain an' fancy cattle thievin' an' ag'inst Brad Bedford for hirin' 'em to do it."

"I figgered all the time Bedford was behind the stealin'," said old Frank Leeds. "But I knowed we'd never prove it till we found out who was actually heatin' the irons. What made you suspect Doss an' Chalky?"

"Just a hunch, I reckon," shrugged Sheriff McElroy. "It's fairly simple to fox up a track with a heel plate that pulls off easy an' it's old stuff to replace hoss-shoes as soon as you git away from the scene of the stealin'. I found rusty hoss nails an' a shoein' hammer in Doss's slicker pocket yesterday whilst they was guessin' my time to the office. The other feller Lookaway saw must have been Chalky, standin' lookout for Doss while he done the dirty work. 'Course all I had was a hunch, but—"

"You'll never convict *me,* McElroy!" spoke up Brad Bedford boldly. "You ain't got a shred of evidence!"

"The hell he ain't!" Doss Larrover spoke bitterly. "I was aimin' to make this my last job under your thumb, Brad. With the reward for layin' it on ol' Lookaway, I was aimin' to marry Josie an' quit the country. I'll still marry her an' go straight after I take my medicine—if she'll have me. But I aim to see that you take your dose, too, *Mister* Bedford!"

"Speakin' of that reward, Judge," said Hunch, "how about givin' it to Lookaway to kinder make up for the knothole we've dragged him through?"

"Hell, yes!" said Judge Chawgood Osborn, clicking his false teeth judiciously. "Where else would he git the money to pay me my *ex post facto* for turnin' him loose?"

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Sure—a Needlewit Is a Sea-goin' Ant, Same as a Sailor Is a Sea-goin' Man

HOMER MEETS A NEEDLEWIT

By FRANCIS GOTT

CAPTAIN BARNABAS LEE was worried. Three months before, because the fishing had been so poor, he had been forced to borrow, signing over his schooner *Sally L.* as security. The weeks and months had passed. The fishing had continued poor—and his debts were mounting.

He shook his grizzled head gloomily; his chief worry was for his crew. They were all such fine chaps—but eccentric, very eccentric. They'd never fit well into another forecastle, he knew. They'd only be unhappy and miserable should he forfeit the *Sally L.* She was both their livelihood and their home.

Captain Barnabas wiped the dripping fog from his eyes. He chewed a cigar into shreds, spat dejectedly. He could find no solution to the problem. The worst part of it was; the crew didn't know. He hadn't had the heart to tell them.

Ever conscious of the safety of vessel and crew he peered ahead into the seeping mist. Fog was the dash of spice that lent variety to life upon the Banks; a man never knew what to expect in a fog mull.

A cough sounded at his elbow, "Sort of like life itself, ain't it, Cap'n. Can't see from whence we come—nor to where we're headin'."

Although he was scarcely a half fathom from the wheel here on the quarter-deck of the *Sally L.,* all Captain Barnabas could see of Hiram Hillgate was the man's cavernous face. That face hung there, caught in the faint glow of the binnacle light, a ruddy blob in the darkness, shaggy mustache dripping moisture.

The *Sally L.* was slipping along quietly through the murk, barely under steerage way. The sails sucked at the almost timeless movement of air and managed to remain full. The sea, the most ancient form of matter upon the earth, laved the hull in whispering cadence, causing to rise in Captain Barnabas' being mocking echoes of distant epochs.

He stirred uneasily. As if in tune to his sudden apathy, he heard a mournful note forward, then another, and another.

Hillgate swore softly, "Them dratted dogs o' Homer Sims."

Captain Barnabas shook off his dreamy feeling to listen. "If Homer's dogs howled, there must be a reason. Again he heard

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the mournful baying of Homer's hound, followed by a threatening yelp from the Airedale, and a savage growl from the bulldog.

Then Captain Barnabas braced his stocky body; for he heard the dogs racing aft. They launched their furry bodies through the fog and lined the taffrail, battle-scarred beasts more felt than seen in the obscurity of the night. A hot tongue laved Captain Barnabas' hand.

"What is it, boy?"

The old bulldog whined. Captain Barnabas bent over the rail. He heard a faint thud and looked down. Close to the ship's side he made out the blurred outline of a small boat slipping past. Despite his age and his bulk Captain Barnabas could move fast. He dropped into the boat, holding to the vessel the while. The craft was, he saw, a peapod, built to accommodate two boys or one man. He realized to his dismay that the peapod already held an occupant sprawled out in its bottom. He prayed fervently that his vessel had not come too late to save a life.

"Hiram!" he shouted. "Get the crew on deck to give me a hand."

Immediately the blat-blat-blat of a fog horn sounded, insistent, demanding. Hillgate's voice punctuated the raucous notes, "What ye gone and done, Cap'n?"

"I'm holdin' onto a peapod with my feet," Captain Barnabas gasped. "It's got a man in it—dead, I cal'ate, the poor feller."

Just then the man in the peapod sat up. "What's goin' on here?" he demanded in a shrill croak. "Got so a body can't get an honest night's sleep anymore."

"There, there," Captain Barnabas soothed, much surprised. "We'll have ye aboard in a jiffy and hot coffee under your belt."

"Get me aboard! Get me aboard where?" the voice railed angrily. "Ain't I aboard me own peapod, mindin' me own business? Who be ye anyway?"

Hillgate's voice hammered through the murk, "What's the trouble, Cap'n?"

BEFORE Captain Barnabas could answer he saw Homer Sims' enormous bulk loom above him. Sims' huge dogs slavered about his legs.

Sims asked in a swollen whisper, "What ye standin' on, a log?"

"Dip your arm, Homer," Captain Barnabas bade.

One of Sims' massive arms boomed downward. Captain Barnabas, holding the peapod close with one hand, placed Sims' thick fingers on the back of its angry occupant.

"Feels like a man," Sims grunted.

"'Tis."

"I got 'im."

"Careful. He's a ugly cuss."

"All set, Cap'n?"

"Yep. Heave."

Sims stiffened. His huge arm boomed upward, carrying the stranger from peapod to schooner in one swoop.

"Leggo!" the man railed. Then an awesome note crept into the voice. "My gosh! Biggest man I ever seed. My gosh!"

After they had hauled the peapod up over the side and lashed her down, Captain Barnabas took the man forward. Sims followed, curiosity aroused to the bursting point. They descended into the warm pocket of light that was the forecastle. Old Vreeley was standing beside the mess table, big ears twitching.

"Oboe, build a fire and make hot coffee," Captain Barnabas ordered.

"Trouble's brewin'," old Vreeley wailed, catching sight of the stranger and wringing his bony hands.

"Ye tend to your coffee."

"Yes, sir," the old man grumbled. "Heck of a time to make a fire on, two o'clock in the mawnin'."

Captain Barnabas, anxious to inspect his find, turned to the stranger. He saw a little man about five feet high, gnarled and rugged. Blue eyes flashed both scorn and wrath from the midst of a hairy face. In one knot-like hand he clutched a green bottle with a swollen belly.

"Where'd ye come from?" old Vreeley asked.

"Never seed such a ship!" the stranger cried. He turned, espied Homer Sims, and started walking around him, waving the bottle. "What a man! What a man!"

Sims' eyes, pin points of brightness in the immensity of the craggy face, winked in astonishment. He turned slowly, wary of the bottle.

Sims' dogs came down the ladder and

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advanced, growling and sniffling fiercely.

"Take 'em critters away!" the stranger shrilled, beady eyes stabbing flashes of distrust about the forecastle. "I never seed such a bunch o' scoundrels. Shanghaied me, ye did."

"Now, now," Captain Barnabas admonished kindly, thumbs tucked into his vest. "If we hadn't happened along, where'd ye be, out here a hundred miles from land?"

"I'd be headin' for home," the little man declared triumphantly.

"Ye'd get capsized and drowned."

A look of scorn twisted the man's graying whiskers apart, "Nah! I got me a tarp in the peapod. In good weather I uses it as a sail; in bad, I just snap it the whole length of the boat, with me under. Then I lies in the bottom and ride it out—snug as a whistle in a barr'l."

From behind the stranger's back old Vreeley winked and tapped his gray locks. Captain Barnabas shook his head. Their strange visitor might be a bit warped perhaps, but he surely wasn't crazy.

"What's your name, little man?" he asked. He liked almost everyone, did Captain Barnabas.

"It might be Smith."

"Well, Smith—"

"I said it might be," the little man said with guile, "and it might be Jones."

"Well, Jones—"

"But it ain't Smith nor Jones," he declared. Then, triumphantly. "It's Wumpus. Ye've heard o' Charlie Wumpus, chief dory man o' the *Nellie T.*"

Captain Barnabas pondered. Then he looked at Wumpus with respect. He nodded. Charlie Wumpus was a legend upon the Banks; among other famed accomplishments, he could catch fish where no other man could.

"Ye must be gettin' along, Charlie," Captain Barnabas mused, inspecting Wumpus from his booted feet, the length of his oilskin-clad body, to the sou'wester covered-head. "I used to hear about ye when I was a boy—and I'm creepin' along toward sixty."

"Seventy-seven," the little man chuckled. "What ye doin' out here alone in a peapod?"

"Ha! That's tellin'?"

"I don't trust 'im," old Vreeley sniffed, his pinched face screwed up in envy as he looked at the other old man. "Ain't no tellin' what a man as looks like him will do. He's even got hair on his eyelids and on his nose. 'Tain't natural."

"Ary more cracks out'n ye, b'y," Wumpus flared, "and I'll split ye wide open."

Old Vreeley subsided; yet he kept muttering to himself and casting dark looks at the stranger.

When the coffee was ready Captain Barnabas handed a cup to Wumpus.

"I don't like coffee," Wumpus stated; yet he took the mug and downed the steaming brew with apparent relish.

Suddenly the tranquility of the forecastle was torn apart. Sims' dogs, growling, baying, yelping, lunged at the greenish colored bottle in Wumpus' hand.

Sims spoke sharply, "Flatten your bellies to the deck, ye houn's o' Satan!"

"I never seed such frightful critters," Wumpus gulped, holding his bottle up out of harm's way.

"They're mine," Sims' murky eyes shone with pride. "I got 'em at the dog pound at a bargain—fifty cents for the three of 'em. The dog catcher had much as forty of 'em. He's supposed to kill 'em, but he likes dogs, has a turrible time keepin' 'em hid from the taxpayers."

"Don't look like nary bargain to me," Wumpus stated emphatically. "One's lost a ear; one's lost a eye; and one's got half her lip torn off."

"They're all pure-blooded," Sims said, scratching the bulldog behind the ears. "I calls this'n Dead-eye. The houn' I calls One-ear, and the Airedale, Torn-lip. Torn-lip's the only she one. She's the boss, sort of. Too old to have pups, I cal'ate."

WUMPUS' owl-like nose twitched. "They orter be drowned."

Sims' eyes narrowed until they became mere pin pricks of greenish flame. Captain Barnabas stared at Sims uneasily. When Homer got that set look on his massive face—

"What ye got in that bottle?" old Vree-

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ley questioned, stooped body aquiver with both curiosity and suspicion.

"Needlewits."

"What?" old Vreeley gawped.

Sims bent over the bottle. "My houn's don't pay ary attention to no ordinary bottles. They's somethin' wrong with this here bottle."

Wumpus scoffed; yet Captain Barnabas caught the flecks of wariness and guile lurking in the little man's bright eyes.

"What's a needlewit?" Sims boomed.

"See."

Sims took the bottle, cradled it in his big hands.

Wumpus' toothless gums clacked in anxiety, "Don't ye dast drop it. Needlewits be rare."

One of the sleeping men in the bunks moved restlessly. Admonishing quiet, Captain Barnabas peered into the depths of the bottle. The bottle was smooth, greenish, much worn and pitted in spots by some corrosive action, probably the sea's brine. It had a bowl-like belly and a thick neck four inches long with a perforated three-inch-wide cork stopper in the snout. As near as he could make out through the clouded glass, the bottle was full of green moss, brown bark and dry twigs. Then he grunted in astonishment. Yes, there was movement in that bottle—little black things working at the bark and twigs.

"They looks like just ants to me," old Vreeley sniffed.

Wumpus nodded, "That's what they be—ants."

"But ye said—"

"Sure—needlewits. A needlewit is a sea-goin' ant—same as a sailor is a sea-goin' man."

SUSPICION rode old Vreeley's tone, "I never heard tell—"

Wumpus stared at old Vreeley in both wonder and pity, "I never heard tell of such a dumb old snort as ye be."

Old Vreeley bristled. "Maybe I be dumb—but I ain't loony. Who ever heard tell of a growed-up man carrying around ants in a bottle?"

"Needlewits," Wumpus corrected. "Now hand over my bottle before ye scares 'em."

"Aw, shuddup!" a trawler growled from a bunk, broad back toward the light.

Sims clung to the bottle, little eyes boring into its depths in fascination.

"Give Charlie back his bottle," Captain Barnabas bade.

"Somethin' wrong with that bottle, Cap'n," Sims maintained stubbornly. "My houn's—"

"Come now, Homer," Captain Barnabas ordered. "Let Charlie have his bottle. He can't do ary harm with it far's I can see, so long as he keeps it stopped up."

Reluctantly, Sims handed over the bottle, but Captain Barnabas didn't like the dreamy look that was creeping over his face. If Homer should have one of his spells—

CAPTAIN BARNABAS climbed topside, plucked a cigar from a vest pocket and held it to his nose. "Heck of a night," he grumbled. "Needlewits—Charlie Wumpus—fog—Homer—"

He took his time going aft, the orb of fire at the end of his cigar a friendly harbinger of his passage. The soothing smoke from the cigar singled out other smells, frayed rigging, gurry-soaked decks, and the awful dankness of the all-embracing fog.

In these waters fog was a menace to navigation forty percent of the time. Ordinarily the seeping mist did not disturb him, especially on a warm July night like this when sound carried far. Now that the war was over, ships did not tear through the night without lights and without the ringing of fog signals by bell or siren. However, during the last few minutes he was getting mighty uneasy. Perhaps the cause of it was Charlie Wumpus plus the green bottle and Homer Sims.

Especially Sims. As Hillgate often said, Homer had more curiosity than a goat, more cunning than a fox and more strength than an elephant. Therefore, Charlie Wumpus and the green bottle and Homer Sims was a combination upon which to look with misgivings.

Feeling lonesome, he stopped beside the wheel.

"Who's the little feller ye fished aboard, Cap'n?" Hillgate asked. "He's got enough grub and water in that peapod to last a fortnight."

"That so," ruminated Captain Barnabas, puzzled. "Wonder what in thunder he was cruisin' around way out here for?"

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"All right, ain't he?"

"Sure."

"Did he tell ye his name?"

"Charlie Wumpus."

Hillgate smoothed his mustache dourly. "Ain't that old wart dead yet! He uster be like a flea, here one minute and gone the next, always with a scheme up his sleeve. I was shipmates with him once 'bout forty year ago."

Suddenly Captain Barnabas' nerves tightened. Old Vreeley, lantern waving, oilskins flapping, burst out of the murk and skidded against him.

"That Homer, Cap'n—" he gasped, pinched face working in anguish. "That bottle full o' needlewits has gone and give him one of his spells."

Captain Barnabas groaned.

"Yep!" old Vreeley cried. "He sneaked that bottle away from Wumpus and opened it. Like he suspected, there was something else in it—somethin' important; 'cause Wumpus snatched it and put it in his pocket. Homer seen it, but he is more int'rested in the needlewits, and him and Wumpus is whispering together."

Captain Barnabas started forward, dodging under guys and braces in the murk. Old Vreeley scrambled behind, shivering, moaning and hugging his lantern.

Just abeam the foremast Captain Barnabas sensed a sudden movement in the fog. Old Vreeley's lantern, an antique contraption, the flame of which hardly did more than needle the soupy night, made an arc as if the old man had fallen.

"Cap'n—!" old Vreeley screamed; then his voice was unaccountably muffled.

Captain Barnabas dodged—but too late. A piece of canvas, stiff, wet, and noisome with the odors of long departed fish, came down over his head. He lashed out with both fists, only to have his arms pinioned at his side. There was only one pair of hands aboard that vessel, he knew, that could close with such strength. Homer Sims! Aye. Homer Sims in the grip of another of his strange spells.

IN A MATTER of seconds Captain Barnabas was pushed forward and shoved down into the forecastle. He heard one of Sims' dogs whimper. Then old Vreeley was lowered and dropped on top of him. Captain Barnabas tore off the canvas, and found the forecastle to be in complete darkness. As he looked up, the slide was slammed shut over their heads.

"I told ye, Cap'n," old Vreeley was muttering. "I told ye—I told ye—"

"Aw, shut your face," a man growled sleepily.

"What's all the ruckus?" from another.

Captain Barnabas lit a match on the seat of his pants. He saw that four men were in the bunks, which meant that only Sims and Hillgate were on deck. Charlie Wumpus, too, for he wasn't in the forecastle. The match went out.

"Light the lamp," chattered old Vreeley, afraid of the dark.

Captain Barnabas lit another match and reached for the lamp, swaying in its gimbals against the bulkhead. He found it wet, reeking of kerosene.

"They've dumped the oil!" he snorted. He stooped, opened a hatch in the deck. "Yes, sirree! Dumped it right in the bilge. Wan't that a damn fool thing to do now! That loon of a Homer—Well, I got a flashlight."

HE REACHED into his bunk, fumbled around. "Nope! Guess I ain't. They've took it."

A man stirred restlessly in his bunk. "Can't a guy get any sleep aboard this hooker?"

Captain Barnabas spoke into the darkness, tartly, "Ye boys might as well know it, but Homer's skipper again. We're in confinement—in our own fo'c'sle. What he's done to Charlie Wumpus and Hiram, I dunno. What he's up to this time, I dunno. We'll have to ride it out, I cal'ate."

Captain Barnabas chewed on a cigar. The prospect was a gloomy one. Why couldn't Homer pick a time when the vessel was not loaded with a good catch that had to be marketed as soon as possible?

"That green bottle," old Vreeley groaned.

"Ye say Homer—?" a man muttered sleepily.

"Who's he turned into now?" another bunk creaked.

Then, a disgruntled growl, "I think I got fleas."

A moment of silence. A slap.

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"Me, too! I'm crawlin' with 'em," in an amazed voice.

"Ouch!" the fourth trawler was awake now. "Why, ye blasted—I'm bein' bit!"

Captain Barnabas blinked. He never allowed bugs to remain long in that forecastle. They got aboard, true; a solitary cockroach or bedbug that promptly and optimistically started to raise a family, only to be exterminated in the attempt. But to have four men beset by bugs, all at once, right out of a clear sky—? Impossible.

Captain Barnabas snorted, "Them's sleepin' pains. If ye boys'd get a bit of exercise—"

Captain Barnabas stood very still, then, legs braced against the gentle swaying of the deck. It must be his imagination, but he could swear he felt something crawling on his leg. It must have gone down inside his boot and crawled up under his pants. He felt it crawl up his calf, past his knee and into the hair on his thigh. He reached down, cautiously, and pinched—and felt as if a tiny pair of red hot scissors had clipped into his flesh.

"Ouch!" he grunted. "Why, ye blasted varmint—"

Somebody barked a harsh laugh, "What say, Cap'n?"

More slaps. Cries. Men thumped to the deck. A match flared.

"Me bunk's alive wid 'em," Hank Barlow said, bewhiskered face aghast.

"Ha!" old Vreeley sniffed as the match went out. "Needlewits!"

"What?"

"Them sea-goin' ants. Homer let much as a hundred of 'em out of Charlie's bottle."

Barlow dug into a hairy chest, cursed fiercely, "That blasted Homer—"

"Now, now," Captain Barnabas admonished. "We gotta make allowances for Homer. He ain't as foolish as he looks."

"He couldn't be," Barlow snapped.

"Ha!" chuckled another. "When Homer thinks he's somebody else, he almost looks intelligent."

Captain Barnabas scowled into the darkness. "Homer's got as much sense in his way as we have in our'n."

"Sure he has, Cap. If it wan't for Homer, this vessel'd get pretty monotonous sometimes."

Captain Barnabas stepped up the ladder, thumped on the slide, loudly. A dog sniffed the crack, whimpered. Captain Barnabas recognized the sniff as that of Homer's bulldog.

"Now, Dead-eye," he cajoled, "be a nice old feller and pull the pin out'n the hatch."

The dog whined again, anxious to please; for he liked Captain Barnabas. Although Captain Barnabas wouldn't give in to Sims and say he liked the dogs; yet he fed them on the sly.

The old dog tried hard to please, whining and sniffing and chewing at the hatch combing. At last Captain Barnabas gave up for the time being. The hatch was pretty solid and it would take an awful pounding before it got broke enough to let a man out; besides Captain Barnabas didn't want to smash his vessel up even if he was to lose her. Sims was capable enough in handling the schooner, but what worried Captain Barnabas was that Sims might take her off her course, thus delaying delivery of their cargo. They'd had a good trip, for once; the hold was full of fish, packed lightly with ice, and it was most important that they were placed in cold storage promptly. A few hours delay in this July weather might soften the fish so that they would be unfit for sale.

The men had run out of matches and were patiently killing ants in the darkness. Captain Barnabas listened to the working of the deck gear above him, too concerned about their scheduled delivery of fish to pay much attention to the ants. He heard a boom thud tight against a guy. A sail slatted. Sheaves squealed as lines raced through blocks. The deck righted and listed to starboard. Captain Barnabas groaned, feeling old and weak and played out. Sims had changed course!

What expectations Captain Barnabas had nursed about using this extra good catch to stave off financial ruin had now gone by the board. He slumped down upon a bench locker dejectedly. He did not stay down long, however, but soon got up and tackled the hatch again. He knew that with the proper amount of coaxing that one of the dogs would betray Sims by opening the hatch.

From time to time he heard Sims' heavy tread on deck, heard his shrill voice trum-

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peting like an elephant. Evidently Homer was set on going places, but where, Captain Barnabas couldn't conceive. Probably Charlie Wumpus, the dried up old hellion, had the wheel. Hiram Hillgate would never consent to such high-handed jokery. Likely they had him tied or imprisoned in the lazaretto, aft.

Captain Barnabas chewed another cigar to pieces. He plucked an ant from his neck and snipped its life away between his fingers. He had sulphur bombs in a locker. But they'd have to wait until the ship's routine got back to normal before he could use them. Time dragged. Philosophically, knowing Homer, the men plucked at what ants were immediately available, snapped them, and then took to their bunks again and slept.

"The boys'll snore their lives away," Captain Barnabas said not unkindly; he was glad they could sleep. "Why don't ye turn in, too, Oboe?"

"Can't," old Vreeley quavered. "I'm too nerved up to catch ary a wink."

Captain Barnabas ate a sandwich, slyly letting the smell work through the crack in the hatch. There was another hatch under the forecastle deck, leading into the hold, but the hold was so full of fish that that way was closed.

Out on the wet deck the dogs sniffed and whined, enticed by the odors of cold meat. Captain Barnabas kept talking to them, cajoling them, and at last the old Airedale set her teeth to the wooden pin and pulled it out. Captain Barnabas heard the pin come out and pushed open the slide.

"Ha! Good girl," he said softly, patting her head. "Pass me up three more sandwiches, Oboe."

THREE noses, cold and wet, sniffed of his hands. A tongue splashed against his cheek. Taking the sandwiches, he tucked them into drooling mouths.

In the east, he noted that the fog was graying, slowly heightening in color to a pearly sheen as the dawn light spread. More relieved than he cared to admit, Captain Barnabas pulled his stiff legs to the deck above.

"Ye stay here, Oboe," he bade kindly. "Wake up the boys. Tell 'em to hit the deck and to hoist their lazy carcasses topside, pronto."

He went aft, knowing that Homer would back down in his foolishness once he was confronted with daylight and the full complement of the ship's crew. In some ways Homer was like a big kid, his sudden strange notions all passing away in due time, but the big man could certainly get them into some terrible messes.

The vessel shimmered eerily in the dawn light. The blazing orb of the sun, veiled by fog, appeared in the east like a gigantic jewel. Dawn came early in these latitudes at this time of year.

Captain Barnabas went aft and confronted Sims abruptly by stepping out of the glowing fog at his back. Seeing his skipper, Sims stood still, little eyes working in the craggy face. In the murky depths of those winking eyes Captain Barnabas read a steady purpose; yet a purpose tinged with bewilderment at sight of Captain Barnabas.

"Now, Homer, me b'y," Captain Barnabas asked kindly. "What are you up to this time?"

Sims turned to Charlie Wumpus who was peering at them through the spokes of the wheel. "Do you know this man, Cap'n Wumpus?"

Wumpus was scared but brazen. "It's Cap'n Lee o' course."

Sims shook his great head slowly, in deep thought. "I'm afraid I never heard of him."

"Never heard—" Wumpus gulped.

"Now, Homer," Captain Barnabas questioned soothingly in a low tone, "who do ye think ye be this time?"

Sims looked down at Captain Barnabas in simple dignity. "I am Dr. Withers—Dr. Withers, the entomologist."

"Ah, yes," Captain Barnabas nodded gravely. "Dr. Withers, the famous naturalist. I might have known. Quite stupid of me not to have recognized you, Doctor. Your—ah—extraordinary ability—"

Sims brightened, trust and faith shining from his eyes. Captain Barnabas turned to Charlie Wumpus, chuckled when he caught

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the scared and puzzled expression webbing the little man's features.

"I never seed such a ship," Wumpus muttered dejectedly. Then, in sudden hope, he gazed appealingly at Captain Barnabas but hope died in his eyes, and he declared fervently, "crazy as loons, the both of ye! Now see here, Sims—er—Dr. Withers—how long ye goin'ter keep me froze to this here wheel?"

Sims was patient. "Until we find your tree, of course. There was a tree, wasn't there, Captain Wumpus?"

"Yus."

"And you filled the green bottle with needlewits from their nest in the tree?"

"Yus."

"Then," Sims stated in triumph, "there will be many more needlewits in the tree, and we can fill many more bottles with them."

"Now see here, Charlie," Captain Barnabas whispered, bending over the wheel, "what do ye mean by stringin' Homer along this way? 'A tree way out here on the Banks! Ha! Ha!"

"They is a tree," Wumpus doggedly maintained.

"Do I look foolish?"

Wumpus scratched a whiskery jowl as if torn between truth and politeness. "Wa-al—they's foolisher lookin', I cal'ate."

Captain Barnabas snorted.

"And we ain't far from that tree now, nuther."

Captain Barnabas frowned, puzzled. "I don't know but what Oboe's right when he says you're crazy."

"That old feller!" Wumpus screeched, bristling. "He's crazier'n a hogshead full o' bob-tailed titmice."

Just then Captain Barnabas heard a thumping under the deck. He bethought himself of Hiram Hillgate, and bent, and unfastened the brass manhole cover leading down into the lazaretto. Hillgate, winking and fuming, came topside.

"That Homer—" he spluttered.

Captain Barnabas took a squint at the compass and shook his head sadly. "Homer, ye've gone and done it this time. Here ye've put us several hours behind schedule already. Them fish'll spile; best gold-durned haul we've had in a blue moon."

The tragedy of losing his schooner lay heavily upon him, now; yet he didn't have the heart to growl at Sims. Then Hank Barlow and the three other hands, followed by old Vreeley, came aft.

A listless laugh came to Captain Barnabas' lips, "Meet Dr. Withers," he said, winking and nodding at Sims. Then he explained, finishing, "Likely Homer listened to them Sunday talks on the radio for so long by that scientist Withers chewing it up about bugs and insects that when Homer seen them ants in the bottle he couldn't stand the pressure."

Amusement coiled in Barlow's yellow-flecked eyes. He reached up and took Sims by the nose, splayed thumb and finger pinching hard.

"So ye're Dr. Withers, eh," he roared with mirth while his mates slapped their thighs. "Well, ye've had your fun, Homer, and we've had our'n—bit by dozens of ants. Now snap out'n it!"

Sims shuddered. A complexity of emotions rippled across his face as if a granite cliff were being shattered by an earthquake. Then his new-found dignity fell away from his immense shoulders. Captain Barnabas, watching closely, reflected that Sims seemed like two men in one skin, each fighting the other. At last the old Homer won out and looked out of his eyes, humbly.

Captain Barnabas turned to Wumpus, "Put 'er back on her course, Charlie."

Wumpus caught his eye, crooked a finger. Captain Barnabas stepped over.

"I got a proposition, Cap'n," Wumpus whispered. "Sims don't know it, but they's somethin' made fast to that tree more valuable than needlewits. So keep us on our course, Cap'n, and ye'll be a good dollar the wiser."

"Now, now, Charlie," Captain Barnabas scoffed.

"Wa-al, take a squint at this'n, then," Wumpus flared. He reached under his greasy oilskins, drew out a tobacco pouch.

Captain Barnabas peeked into the pouch, saw that it contained a mess of grayish-colored grease. He pinched some of it and smelled it.

"Ambergris!"

"Yus."

"Where'd ye get it, Charlie?"

Wumpus bent close, eyes moiling with greed, "Yesti'd'y—when I was dory pullin'

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gettin' ready to sot me trawl, I see a big tree driftin' close aboard. I seen somethin' movin' on the tree, all squirmy-like, and I pulled close and seen them needlewits. So I figured to scoop a hundred or so up into my toggle bottle and take 'em aboard the vessel for pets. Wa-al, I scooped. Then I see a monstrous big hunk o' this here whale grease caught in the tree under a piece o' kelp. Ain't no foolin' me 'bout that stuff—I seen it when I was a wee b'y out in the Pacific, whalin'."

"Worth its weight in gold, especially now. But I thought it was generally found in tropical waters?"

"Gulf Stream must've brung the tree down this way."

"I cal'ate."

"Yus. So I ripped the flag off'n my trawl marker and knocked the bottom out. Then I crammed the keg full o' that grease and nailed the bottom back on. Then I made the keg fast to the tree, under water, and anchored the tree with groundline and a kedge. The vessel wan't far off in the fog. I went aboard and they asked me what I'd done with my gear and I told 'em 'twas still in the water, which was true enough."

"But ye didn't tell 'em about your find?"

"Nah!" Wumpus' knotty face cracked in a snarl. "Not 'em crooks. They'd cheated me out'n a tenth o' my lay, three trips runnin'. So I had supper, snuked grub and water into my peapod and snuk away in the dark."

"Bet your skipper's worried stiff."

"Nah! Not him. 'Sides, I left a note sayin' I was rowin' 'ashore."

"Nigh a hundred mile!"

"Why not? I've rowed farther'n that 'fore now."

"Well," Captain Barnabas hesitated, "if ye think ye can find that tree, we'll keep on."

Wumpus' eyes gleamed. "I'll give ye and your b'ys half. Ye fellers has been good to me even if'n ye be crazier'n a covey o' loons on a moony night."

"Ye didn't tell Homer?"

"Nah! But he was so anxious to get a bottle full o' them needlewits, he made me side in with him. I figured I could get the keg aboard without suspicion. Then I figured I couldn't, 'twas so heavy, but they's enough in that keg, crammed full as 'tis, to help us all out."

"How come ye was asleep when we picked ye up, Charlie?"

"Oh, I thought 'twas me vessel, see. So I laid flat, not wantin' to be cotched. I was nigh onto the tree by that time."

WUMPUS' dead reckoning was good; for, only ten minutes later, Sims' bellow hammered aft, "Thar she be—close abeam!"

Captain Barnabas peered into the seeping mist. Yes, there it was, a hoary giant of a tree, twisted roots and limbs curled about by fog. Beneath, the sea moaned and soughed about the monstrous trunk, sucking through the tangle of branches below.

A dory was lowered into the sea. Wumpus and Sims pulled the short distance to the tree. They soon retrieved the nail keg, dory and men partly hidden and dwarfed by the great size of the floating giant. When

they returned, they not only had the keg but also a gallon jug crawling with ants with which Sims was quite pleased.

Worry was magically lifted from Captain Barnabas' mind when he saw the contents of that keg. He knew where he could sell the expensive stuff at a nice profit, giving him as his share just about enough to free the *Sally L.* from debt.

He slapped Sims on the shoulder, saying gruffly, "I'd hate to lose ye, Homer. 'Tween that radio and them dogs o' your'n ye keep us busy—but don't have ary more changes o' personality right soon, will ye. Don't know as I could stand the pressure."

Wumpus, like a frog in oilskins, looked up from the keg of ambergris and croaked, "The big feller's all right."

"How'd ye like to make a permanent berth aboard the *Sally L.*, Charlie?" Captain Barnabas asked kindly.

The little man grinned, "Yus, I'd like ut fine. Reg'lar home, she be."

Contentedly puffing away at a cigar, Captain Barnabas went forward to needle old Vreeley into getting breakfast. Close at his heels came Sims' three overgrown canines.

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SEA SNOW COMES HIGH

By GORDON KEYNE

I

POINT FRONTIN was a low huddle of rocks on the California coast south of Monterey and north of the war-forged Hueneme Port. It was not a bold, massive cape famed in history. To look at it, you would hardly know it was a cape at all; only the most detailed charts bothered to have the name down.

Fitzhugh was like that—undistinguished in looks.

The first time Cliff Godwin laid eyes on him was when the Japan prison-camp victims reached Manila; he was among them. Godwin was assigned to charge of his group and noticed him as tall, stooped, skinny as a living skeleton.

The second time was the evening Godwin himself landed at San Francisco with a medical discharge. This was when the occupation troops were pouring into Japan. Godwin, after a bout with dengue fever, was one of the lucky ones who drew a home ticket; he had seen plenty of action in the Luzon hills.

It was, let us grant, sheer coincidence that Godwin walked into a Powell Street bar that evening, ordered a beer, and saw Fitzhugh sitting at the bar. In California they sit; it is the law. There was nothing distinguished in the man's looks; he was as skinny as ever—this may be why God-

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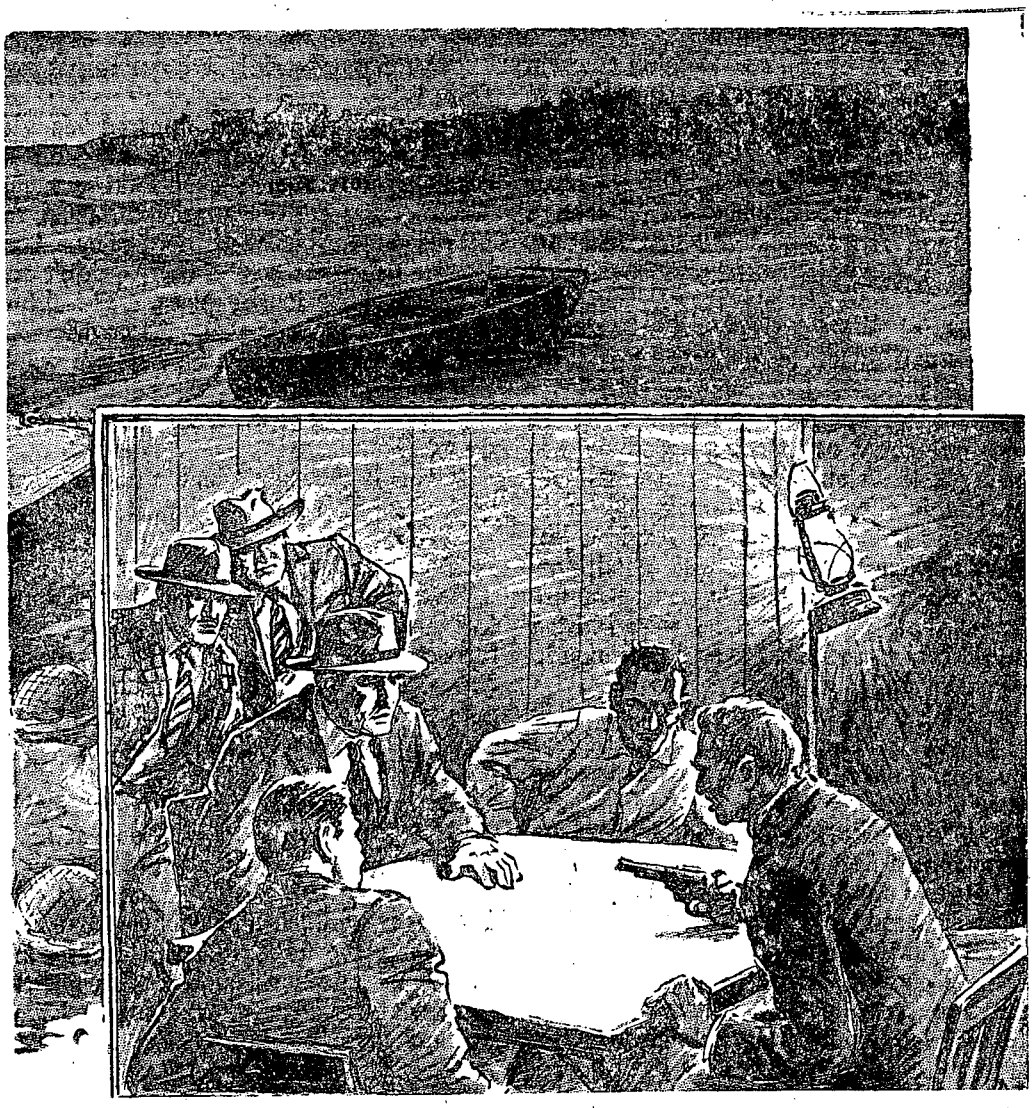

There's Very Little Kick in a Sleeping Dog's Life

win remembered him. An internee from the Japan camps, not a soldier but a civilian, yes.

Fitzhugh had a sharp bony nose, grizzled hair and high cheekbones; it was his eyes that stood out so distinctly. They were dark and penetrating and fixed; they did not shift about or flicker, but held true and straight, denoting a hard man inside.

"Hello," said Godwin. "You haven't fattened up much since Manila."

The dark eyes stabbed at him. "Yeah? How d'you know?" Fitzhugh asked in a challenging but silky voice.

"I was one of the guys who fed you up when you got in."

"Oh!" The man became warmly alive, his hand went out and he might have been a long lost brother. "Mighty glad to see you! This demands another drink—on me."

Somehow, Godwin got the vague impression that Fitzhugh was not at all glad to see him; a feeling hard to explain. He gave his name, said he was going home to Soledad by the night bus, and they talked about Manila. Fitzhugh asked what he meant to do.

"Oh, take a look around, find out about my folks—haven't had any mail in weeks," replied Godwin, "and settle on something that'll pay. I'm a good machinist, but I think I'll try for an engineering course."

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This was all of the conversation Godwin could recall later, when he was trying so hard to remember and to account for Fitzhugh's interest in him. That the explanation was simple and obvious did not occur to him, naturally. He had seen Fitzhugh twice—and remembered the first meeting. Perhaps the skinny man was afraid of him.

The third time Godwin saw Fitzhugh was in the small inland town of Soledad, three days later.

The hotel bar was the only place in town one could get a drink. Godwin was having one drink after another, without appreciable effect except to make life more worth the living—a hard job for him just then. Ordinarily his looks were good; now they were not. His steady gaze was unsteady, his fine even features were bloated and dark bags underlay his eyes. His mouth, ordinarily firm, was ugly.

In the bar mirror, he saw Fitzhugh walk in, glance around, and come to his side, and he knew this was no coincidence, strange as it might seem.

"Hi, Joe!" Fitzhugh clapped him on the shoulder and they shook hands. "Looking for you as I went through town. Hope all the news is good, as the Malays say?"

"Yeah," said Godwin with sharp sarcasm. "Mighty good. My kid brother dead over in France, typhoid. My mother dead here. The old place empty. My girl decided she's met a more lovin' man. Hell of a homecoming!"

"That's tough," said Fitzhugh.

Godwin half-turned on him with a snarl. "You're a damn' liar. It's what I might have expected, that's all, if I'd had any sense."

"Oh! All right, it ain't tough. Just the same, it's too bad," said Fitzhugh. "How you fixed for the future?"

"Dunno and don't give a damn."

"Let's have a drink. Going to stay here?"

"Here? Hell, no. I've been places," growled Godwin. "What'd I do in this hot little sunny dump that's asleep day and night?"

"I was just asking," said Fitzhugh, in his silky voice. "If I was in your boots, what I'd like is a place with horizons. Seacoast, maybe. Quiet little section of the world all to myself."

"Damn the world! I crave to get away from it."

"Exactly." Fitzhugh fingered his glass thoughtfully. "About thirty mile off the coast highway there's a little cove named Viscaya, just under Cape Frontin. A few people have found it; not many. Some Basque fishermen settled there. Ain't even a village store in the place. The fishing never made anybody rich—till now."

Godwin disregarded the last two words, which were important.

"Never heard of it. What would anybody do there?"

Fitzhugh gave him a look, a sardonic half-grin, that had a razor edge to it.

"Would you care?"

"Not one damn' bit."

"No, I'm in earnest. If you could make five hundred a month living there, and you suspected the work was off color—illegal and worse—might even be tied up with gunplay! You'd think twice, huh?"

GODWIN snorted. His head was clear; he knew what he was doing and saying.

"No. Be damned to it! Look at me—nothing to live for. What do I care about legal or illegal? Am I going to grub at day wages while skilled labor grows rich? No. Show me five hundred a month, and I'll ask no questions—and I'm as good at gunplay as the next Joe who doesn't have a gun any more."

"They're not hard to get," said Fitzhugh, and drank. "Godwin, there's a new set-up in the world. A new set-up."

"There you said something—a new set-up!" declared Godwin. "That's it exactly. The old one's gone to hell. The new one doesn't give a tinker's damn."

"I've got to be driving on." Fitzhugh looked at his watch, then pulled out a fat roll and peeled off five twenties, and handed it over. With it was a card. "I owe the boys in the Army a lot; take it. Pay it back later if you want. I don't care. If you're still in the same mind Saturday, go to Paso Robles, to the address on that card. The guy at the store has a light truck loaded for me. You drive it. If you're not in the same mind and would shy off of maybe illegal doings, then forget it and use the hundred on liquor. So long and good luck to you."

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Fitzhugh departed.

Godwin put in four miserable, hell-weary days settling things up. There was practically nothing in his mother's estate, the house was mortgaged, the future was a blank. He was offered seventy-five a month and found, to manage the little local hotel, and laughed.

A new set-up, better for some, worse for others; a lot of truth in those words, he reflected. The old feel of things, the old horizons, were all gone. People who had been places and done things and learned what made a man tick, could not settle back into the old ruts or save pennies in a pig-bank; not any more. That was done with. There was no getting a kick out of a sleeping dog's life.

Paso Robles! That was another coincidence or maybe not, depending how you looked at it. Two of his pals from the old outfit were there and he had promised to look them up.

On Saturday morning, with bitterness in his heart, he said good-bye to Soledad, climbed aboard the bus with a suitcase, and was off for the city. Paso Robles was quite a place. The name of J. Thwing, wholesale grocer, was on the card Fitzhugh had given him.

When he got there, Godwin called up one of his pals, found him at home, and the three held a joyous reunion and game that lasted well into the afternoon. Godwin said he was going to take up a job on the coast, and let it go at that. As the three jawed about Army days in the islands—and they did not mean Hawaii either, for that horizon had also spread afar—Godwin mentioned having met Fitzhugh.

"Funny thing, how them internees just sunk out of sight!" said one of the others. "Scattered and dug in, I guess."

"I've heard tell," said the other, "that the Nips planted one or two guys among those internees—no, not spies, but white men or half-breeds—"

He was overwhelmed with scoffings at so preposterous a notion, and defended it.

"It's no nonsense. Listen, now. These guys came in from all over, didn't they? Not just from prison camps. Some came one by one out of the hills. I ain't neither makin' like a movie! It's fact. You take some poor devil down on his luck, or some guy marked out by his mixed blood, or maybe some Singapore or Manila gangster, and I'm tellin' you there's a dozen ways he might do well for himself by playing the Jap game!"

The argument passed and was forgotten, for the moment at any rate.

The session ended, and Godwin went his way to the wholesale grocery, where he found Mr. Thwing to be a rubicund, hearty sort of man. Sure enough, a light truck was awaiting Fitzhugh, loaded and ready, everything paid. Thwing sat down with his visitor over a highway map and traced the way.

"You turn off here where a road swings out, marked to Point Frontin. It'll take you to Viscaya; dirt road, but fair enough. Some building going on around there, I hear; one of these days we'll wake up and find a passell o' folks in on the ground floor and another millionaire colony a'booming."

"You know Fitzhugh?" queried Godwin.

"Oh, sure. He tucked a load of lumber up there. Buildin' him a house, seems like. Judge Myers lives over there summers too—that reminds me! Rita Myers, that's the judge's daughter, phoned me to make up a couple of boxes of orders for them and ain't come for it. I can crowd it in on your truck, if you'll take it over there. I reckon the judge's car has broke down again. It does every once in a while. Maybe you'll meet him or her on the way—it's an old '38 Allegan coupe painted bright green. They might need provisions bad—"

Godwin assented carelessly. The Myers had the only telephone at Viscaya. It had been put in during the war, when a lookout station for Jap submarines had been located at the cove, said Thwing. Nothing there now.

The garrulous wholesaler ordered the Myers' cartons put into the truck, and got a couple of bottles of coke off the ice. Funny thing, how many Jap subs had been picked up along the coast, and nobody had known about it at the time. Two, he heard, had been blown up near Point Frontin.

"I guess it's the current and the kelp beds," he said sagely. "Y'know, before the war the Japs used to fish kelp by the wholesale along there. Seems like the currents swing it right close to the cape, somehow, and the kelp beds keep down any sea. The

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Japs sure gathered a harvest in those days, but they tell me white folks don't understand it—takes quite a trick to fish kelp! Well, give Fitzhugh my regards and tell him we'll always be glad of an order from him. He can phone from Myers' place."

So Godwin set forth on his way to Viscaya, at the end of nowhere. And the gods, who knew there is no such thing as chance, laughed to themselves.

II

WHEN Cliff Godwin turned off the broad cement ribbon of the coast highway, he bade farewell to civilization and to reality.

The single telephone line that ran along the dirt road to the sea was itself an anomaly, a token of that unreality produced by the war days, when fear of yellow men raiding marked every mile of the coast from Mexico to the Canada line. The Jap, eternally patrolling these shores with kelp-boat and fishing craft, knew every inch of them far better than did their white owners.

It was a lonely road, through lonely country, skirting low, bare brown hills most of the way, with never a hint of the sea; the highway was well inland along here. Live-oaks, occasional staring cattle, and rarely a tiny farmhouse, marked the way.

Judging by his speedometer, Godwin had covered about half the distance when he observed a spurting roll of dust ahead and knew a vehicle was approaching. When he caught a flash of green, he suspected that it might be Myers' car. Upon recognizing the once lordly outline of an antique Allegan, he was positive, and slowed down, then stopped altogether. So did the other car.

Stepping to it, Godwin saw a young woman eyeing him from the seat—quick, glowing eyes under dark brows, in an alertly questioning face.

He smiled. "Thwing described the car, so you must be Miss Myers. I have two cartons of supplies for you here."

"Oh, good!" she exclaimed, instantly animated. "I was just driving in for them!"

"He said I might meet you. My name's Godwin. Working for Fitzhugh."

"Oh!" She gave him another look—a different look, searching, cautious, reserved. "What kind of work?"

"I don't know yet; ask me later. Shall I put the boxes in your car?"

"Please. In the back."

He complied; she turned her car and backed up to the truck to make it easier. When it was done, he came around to her again.

"All set, Miss Myers."

"Thank you," she rejoined, and departed straightway—abruptly, in fact. Godwin climbed into the truck and followed.

"Smart gal," he told himself. "I like her. She doesn't like me. Afraid of me. Why? Is Fitz breaking the law already? He ought to wait for me."

Illegal work—it was really absurd, the more he thought about it. Here in this wilderness, what illegal work could there be? Liquor smuggling, perhaps, or moonshining? Not likely. Hijacking? Perhaps. But hijacking is neither a long nor healthy pursuit in California, as Godwin well knew. Breaking the game or fish laws, perhaps—that would be more like it, and would pay high. He shrugged and dismissed the matter. The green car was out of sight ahead.

Closer to the sea the land became wilder, even less settled—then came wide yellow sands, and the truck was bowling along under the high black rocks of the point, and turning to the sandhills below, where a couple of houses appeared, with the cove and its cluster of shacks a mile beyond.

Beside the first house showed a spot of green. Myers would live there, then. A good substantial house, rather old and weathered, on the higher ground above the beach, with sturdy pines and tamarisk clustering about as windbreak, a boat shed below.

Driving past this end of the telephone line, Godwin sighted a roadside sign pointing to Fitzhugh's house. This was only partly built, with lumber piles and carpenters' horses beside it—also on the higher sand. It had a beach shed or boathouse, and a couple of tents near the building, and a road had been made from the main road to the house, into which Godwin turned.

Fitzhugh came to meet him, unsurprised, with casual air. Godwin felt the man must have been fairly sure of him all along. A third man in carpenter's overalls came slouching forward.

"Here's Jim Bondy, our cook, carpenter

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and general expert," said Fitzhugh genially. "We were just knocking off work for the day."

BONDY was an active little man with prying eyes under shaggy brows, a stubble of reddish beard masking his features; his speech, too, was shrouded by profanity that bubbled forth with every other word. He shook hands with Godwin and went back to work over a gasoline stove in the smaller tent. Fitzhugh led the newcomer to the larger one.

"We'll bunk here," he said, and pointed to an old well nearby, its pump rusted. "Good water. I leased this place from Judge Myers; used to be a tumbledown shack here. Stretch out and be comfortable till supper's ready."

Godwin found plenty to surprise him. For the moment, he was to join the others at work on the house, a low frame structure. This was the 20th; the real work, said Fitzhugh, would begin on the first of the month, but did not state what it was.

"Can you handle a boat—a fishing boat, I mean?"

"I expect so," Godwin rejoined, stuffing his pipe. "Got one?"

"Yes. Anchored in the cove yonder. Small twenty-foot Diesel job."

Talk languished. They sprawled in the sand, smoked, watched the coastline. Beyond the slow, sullen turf stretched the dark expanse of kelp beds, reaching far out. But to the right there was no kelp. It thinned to nothing along the point of rocks.

"Curious." Fitzhugh nodded at the alleged cape. "Currents come in there strongly, almost to the very beach; the water is deep close in, too. Toss a bottle overboard off the point, and it'll come to rest along the line of kelp, half a mile out. Wonderful things, deep-sea currents! Aren't you filled with curiosity?"

Godwin met the biting sardonic gaze and nodded.

"Mildly, yes. But I undertook to ask no questions."

The other nodded. "Right. We'll get on. You've too much intelligence to pry, and Bondy hasn't sufficient. He's a fair carpenter; no finisher, but good enough for this job. In ten days we should have the roof on."

So it began; a singular existence, apparently without rhyme or reason. There was no electricity here, water had to be hand-pumped. Fitzhugh never peeped a word of his past or his ambitions or himself. Bondy was a queer little animal, acquainted with the Basque fishers. These had shrunk to some old men and a few women; Bondy took liquor over there and spent much time there, and Godwin had his own suspicions, for the energetic little redhead had no other horizon than the work in hand and the satisfaction of his own animal cravings. A fishing boat went out daily, and the Basques had a rattly little old truck which presumably marketed their wares. Godwin met none of them, and they kept to themselves.

The work on the house was unhurried. Fitzhugh was a queer mingling of genius and rascality; as Godwin figured him, he must have once been a decent youth of education who had fallen to raw depths, and despite his grizzled hair and his emaciation could not be much over forty. He kept whiskey on hand but did little if any drinking.

With dips in the surf and leisurely work to advance, the days were pleasant enough. The big surprise was Judge Myers, who came over twice to gossip and smoke and look on. He was an unhappy man who limped and walked with a stick, and had haunted eyes. Fitzhugh offered brief comment on him—a smart lawyer, said he, who was not smart enough. He had inherited all this coastal land from his wife's family, native Californians. He had gone out to Manila years ago but things had gone against him there. Godwin fancied it was there the two had become acquainted. Now Myers was an invalid with some spinal trouble, a little money, and a daughter. A middle-aged native couple, the Garcias, kept house for them—pleasant people who, like the Basques, kept to themselves.

The end of the month came around. Fitzhugh, who had an old, tiny car of his own, took the light truck and departed for two days to get supplies and roofing. He would be back on the morrow—had to be here before the first, he said.

Until mid-afternoon, the two men worked at the flooring. This finished, Bondy produced a bottle of liquor and said

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good-bye, telling Godwin he could cook for himself when supper-time came. Godwin concluded, correctly, that Bondy was bound for the Basque shacks and would not return until blear-eyed morning. Paint, oil stain and roofing would complete the house, in due time.

Thus abandoned, Godwin was quite content. He straightened up the house, swept the flooring and stacked the débris outside, put away the tools, and concluding that it was a warm afternoon, changed into his trunks and sought the beach. The desert-island sense of utter seclusion was grateful. Most of the beach was gravelled or rocky, but a convenient sand-strip offered access to the surf, and soon he was fighting the long rollers.

He dived under the outermost and, beyond the line of surf, turned northward and swam, edging the seaweed and kelp and oblivious to all else until the surprising sound of a voice calling his name caused him to tread water and glance around.

HE WAS off the Myers house, which seemed to have a good sandy beach, and heading out for him through the surf was a trimly capped head which he recognized as belonging to Rita Myers. He turned to meet her as she escaped beyond the surf-line.

"Were you calling me?" he inquired.

"Yes, I was. Where were you raised?" she demanded with obvious irritation.

"Inland, on a farm." Godwin chuckled. "Never saw the ocean until I started west, and never swam in it until we moved in on Leyte and the Philippines. Why?"

"Oh! Were you in the Navy?"

"No, ma'am. Army."

She was swimming evenly and strongly, quite at her ease; he caught glimpses of a yellow bathing suit.

"Well, I was trying to warn you away from the kelp-beds. You seemed terribly close."

"Thanks," he rejoined. "Why? Does it bite?"

"Some say that there are things in it, down deep, that come up and grab," she said. "The obvious danger is in getting tangled and drowned. The currents are bad, too."

"Thanks again; I didn't know it was dangerous," he said. "I'll remember. Any sharks?"

"Not in the water, anyhow; but if an octopus grabs you it's no fun. Want to see a cave?"

"Sure. Where?"

"Up at the point. It's low tide now and uncovered. Can you swim that far?"

"With this current, sure. Dunno about coming back."

"Then you can walk. Come on!"

She struck out for the rocky point, a short quarter-mile distant. Godwin, who was no Olympic champion, saw that she far out-classed him in the water and contented himself with following her. The current was setting strongly and aided him, but she reached the rocky shore well ahead, at a shingled beach, where he soon joined her.

The cave proved a mere hole among the rocks, of scant interest. Godwin found the saffron bathing suit much more noteworthy, at least in its contents, and was aware of a certain curiosity on the part of his companion about himself, which he did not hesitate to satisfy. They plumped down in the sand, and Rita produced cigarettes and matches from a waterproof case, and regarded him with latent seriousness in her dark eyes, belying her smiling questions.

"I'm not just plain curious; I have reasons," she observed. "Father said you were a step above Fitzhugh and Bondy—"

Godwin was abruptly nettled. "What business is it of his or yours?"

"Plenty," she replied coolly. "Climb down off your high horse; you don't impress me. I'm the one who'll have to suffer. You see, you're quite ignorant of things here."

"Oh, am I?"

"Certainly; or you wouldn't be here."

"Well, I certainly admire your gall, young lady! I suppose you're quite the queen-bee of this coast, the Lady Bountiful of the sand dunes—"

He checked himself. A sudden hurt showed in her eyes.

"Can't you see that I want to be friendly?" she asked. "Why must you go out of your way to be bitter and angry? Can't you let me try for information when I need it?"

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Godwin swept her with a look. "Sorry. You're an exceptional person," he said, "both in looks and character. I didn't savvy you at first; perhaps I don't now, but I'll give you credit for sincerity. Go ahead; shoot. What d'you want to know?"

"What you're doing here—all of you."

"I haven't the faintest idea myself. I'm working for Fitzhugh."

"Without knowing why?"

"The payoff is why. Fat wages and no questions asked. Why did your father lease him that place of ours?"

She shook her head, squinting out at the sea.

"Father is a failure, an invalid, an unfortunate man—and a darling," she said quietly. "He needs money terribly; he always does. He's not one of your big strong heroes, and I love him for it, Mr. Godwin. That answers your question."

And a hard answer for her to make, he thought. It softened him.

"Okay; you're a square-shooter. I've reason to think Fitzhugh is some sort of crook—just what, I don't know. He's hinted the job may have illegal angles. I don't care particularly, to be honest."

SHE laughed abruptly. "Honesty being the last resource of a scoundrel? Well, it's nice to clear the air. You're not a smug smoothie who's afraid to call a spade a spade, and I like that! We may get somewhere."

"Hope so. You're not just worried stiff because you think that Mr. Fitz may be a rat."

"No. I don't care how long a tail he has. But I am worried for fear that father may get caught in the same trap, whenever that is sprung."

Godwin flipped away his cigarette end.

"I'm no Galahad, sis. I've rubbed off all the corners. I don't go hollering to the cops if I see a bad robber man. I don't give a tinker's damn where my money comes from—just so nobody is hurt because of it. If a game is crooked and I think I can beat it, then I'll play it. Get me?"

"I get you, Joe." Her eyes twinkled sharply at him. "So you ought to help me."

"The hell you say! How come?"

"I have a discharge button like you. Wacs. While I was gone, father got into some financial mess, as usual. He needs supervision."

"And you come hollering to me for help!"

"Why not? Fitzhugh wasn't in the army, was he? And I don't know anyone else around here. My boy friend took up with a girl who stayed home."

Godwin broke into laughter. "That sure sounds familiar! Well, I begin to get a focus on the picture, I guess."

"All I know," she said, rising, "is that something big is in prospect. That's all father will say. That's why I'm scared. And now I've got to coax the old Allegan into a quick trip to town, for mail and supplies, before supper."

"Why not get supper there and take in a movie? Conscience prevent?"

"Nope. If you can get dressed fast, it's a go, and gladly."

They ran down the beach, took a final plunge, and emerged to separate and dress.

"She's all right," Godwin told himself, as he dressed. "Strictly all right."

No apologies for his change of mind, either. The picture was not pleasant; Judge Myers had no business being her father. No wonder she was capable, cool, aggressive. The judge was on the down road, and she knew it, and could not stop him. Probably he had spoiled her whole life—a weak, pleasant, likeable rascal. No wonder his eyes looked haunted. A smart lawyer, but not smart enough, Fitzhugh had said; a damning indictment behind the words. Had they met in Manila? Then—Judge Myers might know something more about Fitzhugh.

The idea made Cliff Godwin thoughtful.

III

FITZHUGH, in the cool of the following afternoon, fetched home a truckload of grub, paint, oil stain and roofing, together with various odds and ends. Bondy was on hand and being an admirable cook, had prepared a handsome repast of yellowtail, supplied by the Basque fishermen.

The sun was sinking when supper was over. Chores were done in turn; Godwin took the tin plates down to the beach for washing, and Fitzhugh came along, chew-

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ing at a cigar and standing watching the kelp-beds with his biting, sardonic gaze.

"Tomorrow's harvest day for you and me," said he, handing Godwin a rich vintage cigar. "Not Bondy. He's out of it. This army marches on its belly, but not on the cook."

"Wise," observed Godwin laconically. Bondy was no man to hold secrets.

"Truer than you know. Harvest out of the sea! You've seen the white coral sands of the orient, Godwin. Suppose, when you were over there, somebody had told you that the cheap, abundant, omni-present coral sand under your feet, would be worth a thousand dollars an ounce delivered here?"

Godwin eyed him. "Poppy smoke?"

"No; hard fact—in a way. Well, the dream may not come true; we'll know tomorrow. You and I must be up and off before daybreak. I should have told you to try out the boat and engine today—forgot it. I'll wake you up early."

That was as near as they came to the mysterious subject. The rest of the daylight was spent in discussing paint and roofing with Bondy.

A thousand dollars an ounce? Godwin rolled up with that figure buzzing in his brain. It told him nothing. He knew of nothing worth that amount of money, except jewels. Yet the hard note in that silky voice had given the words meaning and force. The starry expanse of waters under the cape gave him no inkling of light on the mystery. He caught a soft laugh from his tent mate.

"Trying to puzzle it out, Godwin? Take my advice, and don't. Actually, the only answer lies in the mystery of the ocean currents—a riddle that has no solution."

"You go to hell. I'm not worried," said Godwin, and heard the other chuckle again.

In the darkness and thin starlight of coming dawn, he was shaken awake and rolled out. A light mist veiled, without hiding the stars; land and water were dark. Coffee was warm in a thermos. He and Fitzhugh gulped it down, then departed afoot toward the Basque shacks down the shore; Fitzhugh was nervous, alert, inwardly excited.

"We'll know in another half hour, by the lord Harry!" said he.

Godwin kept silent.

A skiff lay on the sand, with oars. They shoved out in it and gained the fishing boat moored beyond the shallows. While Fitzhugh slipped the mooring and took the skiff in tow, Godwin removed the tarpaulin from the engine and investigated, with the flashlight handed him by the other.

He primed the engine, turned it over, and it caught instantly. Fitzhugh at the tiller, they headed out and up toward the cape, the engine pulsations vibrating over the water; no secrecy, evidently. Two big scoop-nets on bamboo poles ran aft from the bow. With his flashlight, Fitzhugh began sweeping the surface of the water, demanding low speed. They were opposite the Myers house, but well out at the edge of the kelp, when Fitzhugh's voice leaped with an excited quiver.

"Shut her off! Reach me one of those nets, quick!"

Godwin complied. Dawn was coming up; he could see nothing in the water, however.

With the scoop, Fitzhugh splashed after something alongside, and got it, and brought it inboard. Godwin looked at the thing curiously; it seemed like a miniature balloon. A big ball of thin colored glass, under the flashlight, surrounded by a network of thin cord, from which dangled a small netted object. Fitzhugh smashed the glass ball with his heel, opened a knife and slashed at the cords, and disclosed a small tin.

"Now you know what to look for," he said to Godwin. "Take the other net and go after 'em. And if you think it's opium, guess again."

His voice was fiercely exultant. Godwin wisely kept quiet and obeyed.

IN THE dawnlight, the glass balls were bobbing all around them, caught in the current and drifting from Point Frontin toward the kelp. There should be an even hundred, said Fitzhugh. The two fishers brought them in fast, now and again sculling the boat ahead. The balls were smashed, the cords dropped overboard, the tins tossed into the skiff. After ten hours in the water, Fitzhugh volunteered, the cords would disintegrate.

Daylight grew, the eastern hills reddened,

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no more balls bobbed on the surface. Ninety-four had been hauled in.

"Six gone; faulty floats, perhaps," said Fitzhugh. "The hell with 'em! Back to the cove, moor the launch, and we'll row up to the house and beach the skiff there."

With the first rays of the sun, they had the larger craft moored and were rowing up outside the surf to the house; a quick run in, and the skiff was beached neatly. Fitzhugh got out, stretched his legs, and looked at Godwin.

"Curious?"

"I never am, unless it pays," said Godwin, with a shrug.

"Good man! Nothing to do now except fix up the house, till the first of next month. I'll have errands for you with the truck, maybe. After three months, you'll get a bonus, if your tongue hasn't wagged. Satisfied?"

Godwin laughed. "Not until I get some breakfast in me."

They left the skiff above high-water mark and walked up to the tents. Bondy had just wakened, and was getting breakfast.

"Get any fish?" he asked.

"Nary a one," Fitzhugh responded.

After that, they talked of the work on the house.

Godwin knew, now; that mention of opium had given away the secret of what might be worth a thousand dollars an ounce. This did not so much matter. Where the devil had those glass balls come from?

Some ship might have passed, but the ship lane was far out from shore here. Those balls must have been released at one point; they had been strung out along the current. A boat, of course, might have put them there, but this made no particular sense. Where either boat or ship might have come from, was equally puzzling, even had there been one. Fitzhugh had expected an even hundred of the glass balls, and apparently expected another shipment on the first of each month, therefore this was no haphazard undertaking.

They were all three preparing paints and brushes and opening rolls of roofing, when Judge Myers appeared, walking along the firm wet sand of the beach, where the tide was out. Fitzhugh went to meet him at the drawn-up skiff. The two men stood there for some time in talk, and Myers turned the little tins with his stick. So, then, he was definitely in on the game! Godwin wondered whether Rita had asked her father about knowing Fitzhugh in the Orient. Presently Myers turned home, and Fitzhugh came back to the job.

If those half-pound tins represented a thousand dollars per ounce—Godwin tried to compute the value of what lay in the skiff, with dizzying result. Anyhow, it was no less than a fortune. And Fitzhugh, he reflected, would be a most abnormal man if he could sit still or potter around building a house, with that fortune lying under his nose. Indeed, would not distribution be the most vitally important angle of the whole business?

That afternoon Bondy, who had the painting in charge, splashed around with oil stain while Godwin and Fitzhugh worked cutting the heavy asphalted roofing and laying it in place. They broke off for a smoke.

"I have to phone; think I'll run up to the judge's place and do it," said Fitzhugh, and gave Godwin one of his smouldering looks. "May have to go to Frisco tomorrow. Care to go along for the trip?"

"Frankly, no," said Godwin. "Your affairs are no concern of mine, if that's what you're hinting. I'm satisfied here; I like it. I'm not off liquor, but I've quit drinking and the city just doesn't attract me."

Fitzhugh eyed him for a moment, nodded, said no more. After a bit he departed to the Myers' house and was gone for some time. He came back frowning and muttering to himself, and for the rest of the afternoon was in decidedly bad humor.

That evening, after dark, he summoned Godwin with a word and went to the skiff. There the tins were placed on a tarpaulin, which was then wrapped and tied about them, and lifted up to Fitzhugh's car, where it was stowed snugly in the back. Bondy, obviously, was not in the know at all.

With morning, Fitzhugh departed, stopping at Myers' house for half an hour on his way, and not saying when he would return.

MID-AFTERNOON. Godwin, from the roof, heard the green Allegan cough and roar, and saw it roll out with Rita at

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the wheel. He waved but had no response; she had not seen him. Half an hour later, as he was thinking of taking a dip after his sun-sweating roof job, he saw Myers hobbling over.

"Hi, boys," the judge greeted them in surprisingly high spirits. "Do either of you know anything about pumps? I don't, and Ramon Garcia doesn't, and our confounded pump is pumping its head off and delivering no water."

"Not me," said Bondy. "I wouldn't know one end from t'other, judge."

"I might help," Godwin offered, "if it's nothing complicated."

"Fine! Both of you come over and have a bottle of cold beer," Myers invited, and they accompanied him back to his own house, going in at the kitchen.

Garcia, with smiling courtesy, set out bottles of beer from the icebox, which Bondy attacked happily. Godwin, with the judge, sought the pump room; the house had its own electrical system, and the pump was humming merrily without effect.

This, he presently discovered, was due to nothing more than loose packing around the shaft. When he had tightened up the brass sleeve-nut and saw the tank gauge mounting, he pointed out the trouble to Myers, for future reference. They returned to the kitchen to find that Bondy had finished his beer and gone.

"Come into the other room," said Myers. "Ramon, bring our beer in there. Come along, Godwin; fetch your pipe and be at ease."

THE house was simply furnished, with touches of old luxury and multitudes of books. It was pleasant in the big cool room overlooking the beach and water, but Godwin was both surprised and puzzled by his host. Myers was in ebullient mood; his eyes were bright and keen, his words came tripping with energy. He was a different person entirely.

"You fellows are putting up quite a place yonder," he said. "Fitz tells me he hopes to do a lot of fishing this summer."

"I suppose," Godwin replied. "I haven't asked any questions."

Myers gave him a sharp look. "You're not in his confidence, then?"

"An odd word to use, judge. I'm working for him. Confidence exists only between friends. He's no friend of mine," Godwin said warily, scenting some trap.

"Well said. My daughter speaks well of you, too. Hm! Will you do something for me?"

"Depends on what it is, judge."

"I'm in a devilish tight fix, Godwin." Myers spoke very cheerfully, surprisingly so. "Just had a phone call from the city; a man named Jenner is on his way out to see me. I—er—I particularly don't want to see him. I wonder if you'd be good enough to tell him that I've been taken violently ill, and so forth? Anything that comes into your head."

"Can't your servants tell him that?"

"Afraid not. He's a violent sort of person at times. The fact of the matter is, I have a package for him, and he's leaving nine hundred in cash in return. If you'll take care of the matter for me, I'll be very grateful. Friendly act, you know."

To keep the contempt from his eyes, Godwin gulped at his beer.

"Oh, sure, sure," he said with casual air. "It looks queer, but—"

Myers leaned forward, suddenly intent and earnest.

"I'll come clean, Godwin. This fellow Jenner is a rascal. I promised my daughter to have nothing further to do with him, but—er—circumstances have been too much for me. I mean to keep that promise. The only way I can do it is with your help."

Poor devil! Here was the truth speaking. Myers was weak, unutterably weak, afraid to take any stand, seeking with pitiable eagerness to beat the devil around the stump and keep his promise to Rita, yet unable to do so. Godwin began to see it all now quite clearly.

"All right," he said, and refilled his glass, emptying the bottle. "Coming soon?"

"Any minute, I think," Myers replied, and rose. "Thank you, thank you with all my heart! I'll get the package. You'd better wait here. Don't let him come upstairs!"

Godwin assented with a gesture. The judge hobbled out of the room and presently returned with a small paper-wrapped parcel, which he set on the table.

"There it is. I'll wait upstairs. Call me when he's gone, like a good chap."

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Godwin nodded and his host withdrew, clumping up the stairs.

Rising swiftly, Godwin went to the table, felt the package with quick fingers, dropped into his chair again and cursed softly. He understood everything now. That any man could be so fatally weak was hard to credit. Still, the poor devil was a cripple; he had probably been through hell—no use talking to him or at him about it. Godwin picked up a magazine, filled and lighted his pipe, and sat comfortably, waiting. Because Rita was away, Myers had summoned this man Jenner—then had fallen into guilt and remorse and was wriggling pitifully to get off the hook, and dared not.

"Looks like I'll have to come to grips with Rita, and no mistake—for her own sake!" thought Godwin. "Fitz has the judge under his thumb, somehow."

PERHAPS ten minutes passed; he heard a car arrive and halt, and heard voices. Ramon Garcia ushered in a stranger, who stopped short at sight of Godwin. A well-dressed, dark, aggressive man with mouth like a steel trap and heavy-lidded eyes.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "I was looking for the judge."

"My name's Godwin; he left me to see you. He's violently ill. I take it you're Mr. Jenner?"

"Right." The other approached and shook hands; he wore a startled, suspicious air, as though wanting to ask a lot of questions and not quite daring. "But I have to see the judge personal."

"Nope; he's too sick to see anyone. He left this package for you."

Jenner glanced at the package. Anger flashed across his face.

"How do I know? How do I know?" he shot out abruptly. "Do I make like a sucker? Do I hand over good money for—"

"None of your lip, you crooked rattlesnake! And don't reach for that gun under your coat or I'll pulverize you," exploded Godwin with sudden anger. "There's your happy dust. Look at it. Examine it. Take it and pay and get out—and don't come back. Look alive!"

Jenner positively jumped. He looked murder at the speaker, moved to the table, broke the paper with his hands, and examined the half-dozen tins inside.

"All right, looks proper, but you don't got to get nasty about it," he said, and produced a large manila envelope. "Where do you come in, anyhow?"

"That's for you to figure out. Ask Fitzhugh."

"Ask him? By God, I'll ask him in a way he'll understand, the damned yellow devil!" snarled Jenner. "If he wants to play rough—here, the money's inside."

Godwin took the envelope, glanced at the hundred-dollar bills within, and nodded.

"Okay, the job's done. Take your stuff and blow. And remember, don't come back."

"The hell I won't!" Jenner grabbed up the package and turned to the door. "You tell Myers he'll be on his knees lickin' my boots next time I see him—and it won't be long, either. Next time I don't come alone, savvy?"

Mr. Jenner departed, slamming the door after him.

"Pleasant little rat—and I'm a blasted fool," muttered Godwin, and turned to the stairs. "I don't think the message will be delivered; might give the judge the shakes if I did."

IV

"LET'S go sit in the sand and watch the stars," said Godwin. "We'll not be overheard there. Either you'll get some fancy lies and soft-talk, or some damned unpalatable truths; take your choice."

Rita Myers searched his face with alert and startled gaze. They were standing at her house doorway; it was evening.

"All right, let's," she replied. "Father's gone to bed; he'll listen to the radio till the ten o'clock news—come along."

They went down the wooden steps that descended the sand-dune front, and snuggled into the warm dry sand above the water.

"I suppose something's happened," she said.

"Yes. I've been pitchforked into your private affairs."

"Shoot the works, soldier," she rejoined quietly. "I can take it."

"Very well, but it's a damned shame," Godwin said, puffing at his pipe. "Yesterday morning before sun-up, Fitz and I

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gathered a lot of floating treasure off the water out yonder. Little tin boxes, buoyed by glass balls. You wouldn't know what was in them?"

"I might guess, if it's what I'm afraid of. Do you know?"

"No. I'm just drawing conclusions. Fitz went to Frisco or somewhere with the loot, and left some with your dad."

HE HEARD her catch her breath, and went plunging ahead.

"Well, he came over after you went to town, to get help with the pump. And he was a different man. I know the symptoms, so we needn't cover up the facts. He was hopped to the gills—poor devil! He broke down and I felt damned sorry for him. He was trying to keep his promise to you, and Fitz had put the screws on him—well, I lent him a hand."

He went on to tell about the visit of Jenner and what had passed. Rita sat in silence; her very immobility was eloquent.

"So I'm the goat," he concluded. "I'm the guy who sells the coke to Jenner, and your dad's in the clear. On account of you, I don't mind. Otherwise, I wouldn't dirty my fingers with the filthy stuff. Not because it's illegal; I don't give a hang about that."

"I—I don't want your pity," she said with harsh resentment.

"No. Get it straight, kid," Godwin told her quietly. "Most people are cockeyed about cocaine fiends. A lot of men use it, who can get it; you'd be surprised how many doctors take a shot. Others, like your dad, get going too far. He's weak, yes; he's made that way and you love him for his weakness. God knows you've got a hard row to hoe, but I like the way you've faced the matter and are facing it now."

"There's a lot you don't know," she said unsteadily.

"Sure; I can guess most of it, though." He puffed for a moment; she had taken a tough jolt and he wanted to get her mind off it. "Fitz has struck a gold mine. He's got some way of having a fortune set afloat the first of every month. How? Don't ask me. First time I ever saw him, he'd just got out of a Jap prison camp, or said he had. Come to think of it, no one ever proved up on it; we just took his word, naturally. Your dad had known him in Manila. Did you ask him about it?"

"Yes. He evaded. What does that matter? Can't you see how ashamed, how bitterly ashamed and—"

"Whoa!" he broke in. "Hold your hosses, now. You've been a lot ashamed, quite a few years of it; hard lines, and not necessary. You live your life, not his. He's just played in hard luck. It's made a grand woman of you, true blue, hard as steel. Lots of folks are ashamed because their fathers died of drink, maybe, and let it ruin their lives. That's a mistake. Don't you make it. You keep right on fighting. I'll help. We'll pull your dad out of the swamp he's getting into."

"But you don't savvy at all—"

"The hell I don't! Maybe your dad got his happy dust from Fitz, in Manila. Anyhow, Fitz has a hold on him and has worked it to get established here. Jenner is a local guy who supplied your dad in the past; and he knows Fitz, too. Because your dad is a smart lawyer and so forth, they figure to get his feet in the mud till he sticks there, and make use of him. Your dad has put up more'n one fight against it all. You've helped him. Now it looks like a losing fight, huh?"

SHE uttered a shaky little laught. "You do seem to have the gist of it, soldier."

"Okay. Never mind details. Plenty of time in the years to come for pulling out the little burrs that stick in the soul and hurt. I like your dad; I'm sorry for him; I think he'll win out yet. What worries me, is Fitz. You know, his largest headache is distributing the stuff—getting rid of it to people like Jenner. They're the ones who ought to be stood up against a wall without trial. The rattlesnakes who parcel out the dope to folks everywhere, to retailers and so forth. They feed on the hopeless and doomed—they do it for money. I tell you, I've killed many a Jap, and I'd just as soon kill guys like Jenner as I would Nips! Little animals, only worse."

The strong, steady overtones of his voice spoke of relentless purpose. The stars were out; he looked at her, sitting there motionless. There was a sparkle on her cheeks, tears; but he had put heart into her, had helped her overcome her first emotional

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reaction. Now she was herself, in control again.

"Word will get around," he went on, musingly. "Men like Jenner will spread the news that Fitz has a way of picking up a fortune the first of every month. They'll squat like vultures around a corpse, waiting for him to hand out the parcels. Why, he'll clean up enough in a few months to retire for life! A gold mine is nothing to it."

"The war sent the price sky-rocketing," she put in.

"Yeah." Godwin knocked out his pipe. "Now, sis, you and me have to figure things—our own private funeral."

"Where does the stuff come from?"

"Never mind that; it's only incidental. What are we going to do about your dad?"

"I don't know." Her voice was dreary. "That's why I settled here with him, out of the world, at the end of nowhere—to help him in his fight against the habit. And it was going well—until now. Seems like there's no escape anywhere."

Godwin grunted. No escape anywhere for a weakling, he thought to himself—for a man who did not have the strength or fight inside of him. But he voiced the thought otherwise.

"Escape isn't the thing. Let the other guy do the escaping. I've got to have a rub with Fitzhugh, and I don't like to be on the receiving end; I like to carry the fight to the other guy. I did that with Jenner—warned him not to come back, and meant it. He just thumbed his nose at me, so to speak. You couldn't keep him away now with thunderbolts, any more than you can keep vultures away from a corpse. At least you can, but there's only one way. With a bullet. And this is the U. S. A., where they ask questions about corpses."

His whimsical tone made her laugh again, less shakily.

"Cliff Godwin, I'd be in an awful mess without you. What'd I do?"

"Oh, you'd pull through. Question is, now you got me, what'll you do? Remember, I advise carrying the fight to the other guy. What's our aim—to get your dad away from their clutches? Well, you can see for yourself Fitzhugh isn't going to give up his gold mine and quit."

"Let me think; you're jumping at conclusions," she said slowly. "Sleep on a thing and answers often come."

"My mother would have said pray over it," Godwin put in. "I never found it worked."

She struck a match, cupped it in her hands, lighted a cigarette.

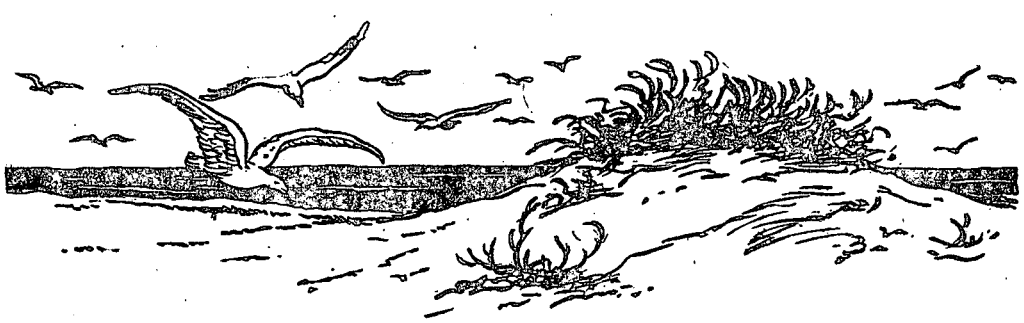
"There's luck in leisure, soldier. Meet me here tomorrow night. Let me think what can be done. Right now it looks as though we'd have to learn all about where the stuff comes from, learn everything, if we're going to carry the fight to Fitzhugh. And I'm in with you on that, remember; don't leave me out of it."

"A buddy is always handy, even in skirts," said Godwin. "You're right, though; this isn't a thing to settle today or tomorrow. If I've got to live a while with Fitz and keep my thoughts hidden, I can do it."

"You've given me the whiphand over father, too," she said thoughtfully. "Savvy? I'll find the stuff he got from Fitz—probably a tin, maybe two—and then I can handle him. Tomorrow I'll go to bat with him and get the worst over. Maybe I can force some clue out of him to explain where it comes from."

"You're a wonder, sis!"

She laughed and came to her feet. Then



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she held out her hand, as he rose, and gave him a firm, steady grip.

"No. You're a wonder, soldier—*the* wonder! I'd have been lost—beaten down, hopeless, done for—without you! Tomorrow night, then; meantime, we'll see what we can learn."

NEXT day was hot sunlight, a still, heaving ocean, the kelp-beds a sullen surface. The Basque fishing boats had been out early, and returned early. All morning the two men labored, finishing the roof and the inside stain, setting the windows in place. Toward noon Bondy knocked off and went over to the Basque shacks. He came back with fish to fry and a shimmering glass globule, which he displayed with a chuckle.

"They got four of them over yonder," he said. Godwin stared at it.

"What is it?"

"Glass. Ain't you never see 'em?" Bondy fingered the iridescent globule. "I know where I can get two bucks each for 'em. Used to be, before the war, you could find 'em all up and down the coast. Folks collect 'em, put 'em in gardens and so forth. Them folks there found four floating in the cove."

"I don't get it." Godwin frowned. "What is it?"

"Floats for nets, of course. Japs used to use 'em. Reckon I'll go to town Saturday and take the four along and sell 'em. They figure on taking a load of fish into town, too."

Thin glass balls—floats! Godwin went back to work, thinking of the miniature balloons he had helped pick up, with cordage netted around the glass balls. Fitzhugh had missed a few of his hundred. The netting, he had said, would disintegrate after ten hours in the water. Why? No accident. It would go to pieces, letting the little tin down to oblivion, leaving the glass ball afloat. A good safe scheme in case things went wrong.

The thing kept tumbling over in Godwin's mind all afternoon; he ended by giving Bondy two dollars for the glass ball, which was the size of his head and of a beautiful light purple shade.

"Y'know," said Bondy, chortling over the bargain, "them things were used instead of cork floats in fishnets; cheaper. I bet Fitz could tell a lot about 'em!"

"What makes you think that?" Godwin asked idly.

"He talks Jap. Day he hired me, he was spattering Jap like a house afire, with a feller just back from Tule Lake, where them Japs are interned. Yes, sir, I bet Fitz could tell a lot, if he had a mind!"

"Naturally. He was interned by the Japs at Manila and rescued by our troops," Godwin said.

Bondy grimaced. "Yeah. Likely yarn. Maybe he was, maybe not. Think I'd believe his sayso? Huh!"

GODWIN lending a hand, they got the first coat of exterior green slapped on the little building before sundown and supper. There was no more talk about Fitzhugh; the subject had no further interest for Bondy, evidently, and he prattled of other things.

Not so Godwin. His mind was darting in and out upon the matter like a dog at a bone. His thoughts went back to that talk with his two army pals at Paso Robles; a fever of conjecture took hold of him.

After supper he left the glass ball lying on Fitzhugh's cot, and cleaned up mechanically. He had a dip in the surf, while Bondy lay chuckling beside the radio, and then walked up the shore.

A dark shape came down the Myers' steps to meet him.

"Hi, Joe!"

"Hello," he said. "Have any luck?"

"That depends on what you call luck," she answered. "It's been a ghastly day; I went to the mat with father, all right. And he wants to see you, now. He'll talk."

"Let it wait," said Godwin. "Sit down; take five minutes."

"All right; no longer." She dropped beside him in the sand. "I'll sketch what I've dug out, anyhow. He knew Fitz in Manila. Fitz handled dope there for Japanese interests and was hand in glove with the Japs."

"That fits," said Godwin, and told her about the glass ball. "I've got things figured out, Rita; whether right or wrong, I can't say. Want the diagram?"

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"Sure." She lit a cigarette. "It may help in talking with him."

"Here goes, then, at a guess. Fitz has a big pull with the Japs. When we move into the islands he has things all arranged with them and poses as a prison-camp internee, though as far as I recollect he doesn't figure in any of the lists. The Japs are huge grafters, remember. They'd sell their own arms and ammunition to the enemy. Anything for money! And they have a corner on practically all the cocaine in the world. So what?

"At a certain point on this coast, which they know intimately, they send over on the first day of every month a shipment of happy dust. Fitz is on the spot to receive it. A boat brings it, leaves it at night, is gone in the morning. There's big money for all concerned. A fortune's at stake—a few months of this and everybody's rich. Get it?"

"Hm! There are flaws—but I think you've got the answer," she said slowly. "A boat every month across the Pacific? Maybe; doesn't seem very likely. However, I think you've hit it in a general way, perhaps. But I don't savvy about using the currents here."

"THAT'S the neatest part of the job, in one way," Godwin explained eagerly. "Those jiggers are set afloat; ordinarily they'd go bobbing all over the ocean. But not when they're put afloat off the point, no sir! It's deep water out there; a boat can lay safely and do the job. The currents take the floats inside the point and right over here to the kelp, which stops 'em dead. They're held. After ten hours, if no one shows to pick 'em up, the cords disintegrate and the evidence is gone."

"Sounds convincing," she said. "And yet I still think there's something screwy about a boat coming over here from across the ocean to do it. Especially in war time. Well, do you want to come in and see father?"

"No, but I will," said Godwin. He was a bit dashed by her cool reception of his theory, which had given him a decided thrill in the working out. "Doesn't seem likely? When we've got the Nips on the run, when they're looking around desperately for some way of getting on their feet when the war ends? They hold the Chinese coastline—"

"I know all that." She stood up, and tossed her cigarette away. "But as you said yourself, it doesn't concern us. We can figure it out—but what are we going to do about it? That's what worries me."

It was worrying Godwin, too.

V

JUDGE MYERS was a broken, shattered figure, eyes haunted once more, flickers of strength and purpose coming into his features and then vanishing. The humiliation of laying himself bare to Godwin must have been bitter in the extreme, but he did it, and Godwin respected him for it.

The confession was done. Godwin took it without undue emphasis.

"You can come out of it, sure," he said.

"For Rita's sake, I must and shall," said the older man. "I can do it."

"Sure. What interests me, is Fitzhugh. You say he was a big shot in the underworld of Manila?"

"Yes; what the papers would call a vice overlord," Myers rejoined. "He was said to be part Japanese, though he didn't look it."

Godwin exchanged a glance with Rita. "And he got into touch with you here."

"Yes. I had met him in Manila. He knew that I was a—a victim to the habit. He wanted to settle on this particular place and had found that I owned it. I—well, I had to give him a lease on a few acres. I was weak. I had done without the drug for months; he gave me a supply—I just could not resist."

"Don't kick yourself," said Godwin. "You're not working for the guy; I am. You were forced into it; I wasn't. He didn't mention any of his plans to you?"

"No. Said he wanted to build a shack and settle down, and retire. I remember, now, he questioned me quite keenly about the airplane shore patrol. You know, it was constant during the first years of the war, and was relaxed when danger from Jap raiders ended."

Godwin nodded, chalking up the points mentally.

"And this Jenner—he'll be the local agent or wholesaler?"

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"Yes. He owns several beach clubs, north and south—liquor, gambling, and so on. He's quite a power locally." Myers wet his lips. "I don't just know how I can evade any contact with him, if he insists—"

"Simple. Have none," said Godwin. "Don't let him worry you; scratch him off the slate. Fitzhugh's the one to think twice about."

"Why?" asked the judge.

Godwin made no response but puffed at his pipe, frowningly. "Look, we'll help you out of this jam," he said at length. "I'm pitching into the game with Rita. Why? Hell! Because I've nothing else to do, maybe. Because I like her, maybe. Because I can't sit still and twiddle my thumbs, maybe—what does it matter? But you've got to play ball with her, judge."

It was a bad half-hour, for the lawyer went to pieces; his remorse over the wreck he had made of his life was acute. Godwin did not spare him but pumped good straight talk at him—for his daughter's sake. When at length the tears had flowed and the unhappy man hobbled off to bed, Godwin wrinkled up his nose at the girl.

"Let's go back to the stars and the waves, where it's clean."

She flushed. "Sorry. Humiliation is a bitter pill—"

"Bunk. Quit feeling sorry for yourself. Quit pretense and make-believe," he broke in. "How about taking along a couple bottles of beer and drinking it down yonder? Might help in facing the facts, which look ugly."

She gave him a quick, almost laughing glance, and went for the beer. His matter of fact, blunt common sense robbed the situation of half its terrors.

ONCE back in the sand above the pounding surf, Godwin sipped his beer and attacked the problem.

"Sis, the theory is proved up—well enough for our purposes, anyhow. Fitz has Jap blood; he's as good as one of 'em. And we've got the answer to the ship or boat theory, in his questions about the air patrol of the coast."

"I don't see it."

"I do—to my own satisfaction. How could the Japs ship a quantity of cocaine over here every month? Only one way. Same way the Germans shipped stuff through a blockade; by submarine. Perfectly safe, easy, simple. Purely a commercial proposition, remember—no war stuff involved. Graft for some of Fitzhugh's Jap big shots, graft for the sub crew concerned, easy money for Fitz. Can you accept that guess?"

"Yes, I think so," she replied. "Why did you say Fitz was the biggest headache here, and that the facts look ugly?"

"Fitz is away, probably at Frisco, peddling the stuff. He'll come back with some sort of organization all formed—dangerous guys, real vultures with beaks. Jenner is just a local crow. Men like Fitz you have to think twice about, and if you give them half a chance they'll get you sure."

She was silent for a little. Then:

"I don't see any answers, except to take my father and get away—and we've no place to go."

"Back to the escape notion? Forget it," said Godwin briskly. "Now, your share of the job is to take care of your dad, savvy? Keep him out of it, keep him at home, get him back on his cure."

"I can do that. He's given me the tin of cocaine. I'll dole it out—we've agreed on all that part of it," she said.

"Okay, and leave the outside stuff to me."

"What can you do?"

Godwin uttered a harsh laugh. "Fitz tipped me off. 'A new setup,' says he, and that's what it is. A new setup in this country and everywhere. The old standards are gone. A guy who has sweated out his guts in foxholes for two or three years has learned things. He knows how to handle vultures."

"That's brag," she said quietly.

"I know it," he assented, "but it has a basic element of truth, sister, so let's quit the argument. Fitz is a dangerous guy. So am I, and no altruist. I'm not out to do good in the world. I'm out to save your dad from the vultures—for your sake. Understood?"

He finished his beer, picked up her bottle, and rose.

"Come on, I'll take these back, see you safe, and be on my way."

Neither of them spoke again until she had taken the bottles from him at the house door.

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"Good night, soldier," she said. "I think I like you a lot."

"Thinking is a bad habit; better make sure of it," said Godwin, laughing. "Pleasant dreams, and sleep tight."

He went back to the tents, found Bondy snoring, and turned in, putting aside his troubles until the morrow.

MORNING brought storm—a blow out of the southeast, driving in thundering surf along the shore, skies gray with scud. A swell day for a murder, observed Bondy; got to wait for the paint to dry, before putting on the final coat, so might as well get at the inside trim and the doors. He went about it, and Godwin turned his hand to getting things cleaned up outside.

A little before noon, Fitzhugh returned, in a newer and better car than the one he had driven away. He chucked a heavy package at Bondy.

"Steaks," he said. "And don't fry 'em, or I'll murder you!"

Bondy chortled delightedly and retired to his tent and stove.

Fitz came to Godwin. "Everything all right?"

"Depends on the definition of right," said Godwin, smiling. "Got stuff to unload? I'll get at it."

He did so. Fitzhugh went on into the larger tent, then came out, took a look over the house, and nodded at Godwin. There was a smoldering spark in his sardonic gaze.

"Good work, feller; we'll move in pretty quick. Better put that cement under cover in case it rains before we can make the walk. You collecting glass now?"

So he had seen the glass ball on his cot.

Godwin nodded. "Bondy got it from the Basques. Might be a good idea to get the other three they found, but I let it go till you came home."

"Oh!" said Fitz, and his eyes cleared. "Those are grand steaks; we mustn't spoil them."

"It would be a pity," Godwin agreed.

"I'll talk business with you after we eat. I think you'll like it."

The steaks proved to be something special indeed; Fitzhugh proved very pleasant, in cheerful spirits, and the feast was a big success. Talk business, eh? What did he mean by that? Godwin had no inkling until Fitz produced fat Havanas and beckoned him away for a walk along the beach.

The skinny man chewed at his cigar, drank the gray wind into his lungs, flashed keen glances seaward.

"I had quite a trip; settled some big things," he observed. "The biggest takes place tonight. Some friends are arriving for a meeting; I think I'll have Judge Myers put 'em up."

An electric signal jangled in Godwin's brain.

"Don't," he said laconically.

Fitzhugh, brows lifted, shot him a look. "Eh? Have you developed scruples against our business?"

"It's no skin off my nose," said Godwin, his face like a mask.

"That's right. I've decided to take you in on the ground floor with me. I'll spill everything to you, come clean, double your salary."

"You must be mighty uncertain about your evening's guests," said Godwin.

Fitzhugh darted him another look, then broke into a laugh. "You can put two and two together, can't you?"

"I've done it already," Godwin said impassively. "Have I asked you any questions?"

"No."

"I'm asking none now." Godwin halted. Fitzhugh stood looking at him, eye to eye. "I'll make a bargain with you."

"A bargain?" The voice became silky, edged with smooth danger. "You don't mean to say you have demands to make?"

"No. One favor to ask, that's all," replied Godwin.

The other smiled, relaxed. "Ah, that's different! I've watched you; we'll get on. You're reliable. I need a man like you at my back, Godwin. I can trust you. What's the favor?"

Godwin took a deep breath. The moment had come to open attack, and he could not dodge it. He threw off the mask, abandoned his dispassionate mien and met the smoldering gaze with a slight smile. He was not taking orders now.

"You've played a mighty risky game, Fitz," he observed, "and I must say you've played it well and carefully. I have it all figured out, and the possibilities are tre-

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mendous. I'm ready to play ball with you, at least for a time. I'm a practical guy, no Quixotic fool. Say the word and all cards go down on the table."

"Agreed." Fitzhugh, frowning slightly, eyed him uncertainly.

"Jenner was here to get his parcel from the judge," went on Godwin smoothly. "I let him have the happy dust, but he didn't see Myers. And he won't be back again—that is, if he's wise."

"Jenner? That cheap crook?" murmured Fitzhugh. "Happy dust—so you know?"

"You needn't tell me a blessed thing, Fitz; not a thing. We'll get on just fine, provided you'll forget that Myers exists. Just that; scratch him off completely. It's a small favor. It'll save me some mighty unpleasant things. You, too. Yes?"

The hot-sparked eyes were slitted now, boring into Godwin. Fitz lifted one hand, settled his elbow into the other hand, rubbed gently at his sunken cheek, took the cigar from his mouth.

"That's odd," he said, very softly. "Are you working for me?"

"No. With you, if you'll let me."

"And you want me to cut Myers out of the picture entirely? I'm afraid," mused Fitz, "very much afraid, that can't be done. It would spoil the whole layout as I have it figured. What's your sudden interest in Myers?"

"The poor devil is trying to keep clear, to fight clear. His daughter is helping. I'm lending a hand."

"Oh, the daughter! I see," observed Fitzhugh, and nodded, slowly. He appeared quite unexcited, unemotional, completely calm. Only the pallor creeping across his emaciated features, and the tightening of the lines about his mouth, hinted otherwise. "I hope you're not determined about this thing, Godwin?"

The latter laughed, though aware of the electric tension between them.

"Now, Fitz, don't start shoving me around," he said amiably. "You and I aren't two kids. We're men. Sparks are perilous playthings, and we don't want to peril the nice layout you've worked so long and hard to perfect. Eh?"

"I can't figure you as a fool, Godwin, but you talk like one," said the other, still softly, equably. "You surely must know my plans have gone too far to be changed."

It was coming. Godwin could feel it; he could sense the hot vibrations from those slitted eyes boring into his own. He was ready for it, feared it not, gathered himself to meet it halfway. Gun under loose coat, of course; a swift snatch—

"Well," said Fitzhugh, "after all, I suppose plans can always be changed. But not mine—no, not—not mine—"

His words died away; the deadly tension relaxed, he was looking over Godwin's shoulder, focusing on something there. Wary of a trap, Godwin moved around and sighted a figure hurrying toward them, running. The figure of Rita Myers.

VI

WITH a bare nod to Fitzhugh, the girl halted.

"Will you—can you lend me a hand, please?" she exclaimed to Godwin, color of haste in her cheeks, her dark eyes anxious and frightened. "It's father. He's ill."

"You bet," said Godwin.

Fitzhugh intervened smoothly. "Perhaps I can be of service, Miss Myers? I'm an old friend of your father's—"

"An old acquaintance, but I don't think a friend," she broke in. "Thanks; I'll not trouble you. Come along, Mr. Godwin. We'll have to hurry."

She turned. Godwin jogged Fitzhugh's elbow.

"Better think twice," he said. "It's better to make plans and change 'em, than not to have any at all. See you later."

He hurried after Rita. She said nothing until they were well beyond earshot of the skinny man, then gasped out quick words.

"He's locked in his room. He's got a gun, says he intends to kill himself. The Garcias are scared stiff. I can't get at him or I could handle him."

"I bet you could at that," said Godwin, and broke into a run.

Not waiting for her, he leaped up the sand-stairs to the house and darted inside. He was up the stairway two at a time. In the upper hall, Ramon Garcia stood irresolute; his wife was on her knees, frightened and praying. Garcia pointed to a closed door and Godwin went to it.

"Hey, Myers!" he called.

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"Yes? Stay out!" came a quavering response.

"Okay. I'm coming in," rejoined Godwin. "It's me, judge."

He drew back, hurled himself, and his weight crashed the door open. Godwin got his balance to see Judge Myers, fully dressed, standing by the window, empty-handed. He swung the door closed behind him, almost in the face of Rita.

"This is a hell of a way to intrude upon—"

"Hush!" Godwin broke in, put his hand on the arm of Myers, and spoke urgently. "I had to see you at once. I think I've got things all squared away with Fitz. There'll be no trouble. See? Everything is settled. But I may have trouble with that skunk Jenner, and I want a gun in my pants when I talk to him. Rita said you had one."

Myers, eyes fever-bright, jaw gaping, pulled himself together.

"A gun? You say you want a gun?"

"Yeah. Lend me yours, like a good chap."

"All right. You can borrow mine—but you watch out for Jenner! He's a snake!"

Myers went to the bed, turned back a pillow, caught up an automatic and extended it.

"Only three cartridges in it," he said, as Godwin seized it.

"That's fine. Swell! You hang on, now, and tomorrow we may have some good news for you. Atta boy! Much obliged."

Godwin hurried out into the hall and found Rita in front of him.

"All right," he said, low-voiced. "I busted up his mental processes and got his gun. Glad to have it myself. Come on downstairs a minute, and he'll be over it—"

Downstairs, he examined the automatic and found it did hold three cartridges. Rita looked at the weapon.

"You certainly wasted no time—see here! That's not his pistol!" she exclaimed. "He has an old Army revolver. I didn't know he had this one!"

Godwin slipped the pistol into his pocket. "Okay. Now, listen. You came along just in time to stop Fitz from getting hurt. I was having everything out with him."

"Oh! I'm sorry. I've balled up my job with father—"

"Forget it; you're handling it fine. He'll calm down now. But it's like I told you; the vultures are gathering. Fitz has some guys coming tonight to map things out with him, and it may be a showdown."

"What do you want me to do?" She met his gaze, stiffening into quick control.

"Sit tight."

"Don't you know that with father—anything's liable to happen? It's pitiful! He's remorseful, says he doesn't intend to ruin my life and—"

"Listen, kid." Godwin took her by the shoulders, shook her slightly, looked into her eyes. "We can't help what he does; we're responsible only for what we do, savvy? Just handling ourselves is job enough. See your dad, act as though nothing had happened, tell him I've got the situation in hand, and kid him along."

"But you—with those men tonight—"

"Hell's bells!" said Godwin. "Do you think a guy who's soldiered from Saipan to the Kuriles can't handle a half-breed Jap and a couple of city thugs? Leave it to me. I'll have Fitz eating out of my hand in two minutes. So what? So—this."

He laughed, leaned forward, kissed her on the lips, and strode out of the house.

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IT HAD all come to him in a flash as he stood there. Now he walked briskly along the beach toward the tents. Fitzhugh was standing by the house doorway, directing Bondy, who was carrying in folding chairs and a couple of card-tables. Fitzhugh turned and fixed him with a level, challenging look as he approached. He waved his hand.

"Everything all right; the judge had a few jitters. What's going on here?"

"Preparations," said the skinny man, still eyeing him. "Our guests tonight are bringing along a picnic supper; it'll be a good one. Jenner's coming, by the way, and two others; I expect they'll have chauffeurs along."

"Bodyguards, huh?" Godwin smiled and crooked his finger. "Come along, let's finish our talk, Fitz, down by the waves."

"I thought you had finished your end of it."

"No; I was saving the best for the last."

They walked down to the wet ebb-tide sand, and Godwin halted.

"For your sake," he said, "I hope you're not getting them here with any notion of letting them know where the stuff comes from?"

"You're worried about me, eh?" Fitzhugh flung him a sneer. "As it happens, I am. They have to know before coming to terms. Not everything, of course—"

"Not one damn thing, Fitz, if you want to stay alive," broke in Godwin cheerfully. "Look. It'd be simple for me to kill you. It'd be simple for you to take a notion to be rid of me, like you did back there when Miss Myers interrupted. But why? I'm not blabbing to sheriffs or narcotic squads or the coast guard; I'm running my own show. Well, you're practically committing suicide by letting them in on your game. You're not in Manila now; this is their territory. They've tasted blood. They'll rub you out like a cockroach and grab everything right off the reel, see if they don't. You've been smart in the past; why not be smart now?"

Those sallow, emaciated features were a study, as Fitzhugh listened, in rapidly shifting emotions. Anger, interest, startled surmise, played across his face; his dark eyes became thoughtful.

"Maybe you've got something there," he said slowly. "I hardly realized, till I turned over that snow to them, what it meant. Pure, genuine, unadulterated stuff by the pound—and worth a grand per ounce. No wonder it knocked 'em silly. What d'you mean by being smart?"

"They think you're alone—and you are. Playing a lone hand. Well, go for a walk before they come. There's a cave under the cliff. Go there and stay there. Let me do the talking. Walk 'em into something unexpected, savvy? This is a game of dog eat dog, and I'd bet a million dollars they'll come here tonight aiming to cut your throat on the spot and take over your gold mine themselves."

The skin-tight features fell into lines of strain and worry. After all, Fitzhugh had been playing a lone hand, and he was no superman. He put up a hand and rubbed his lean jaw; his steel-hard eyes probed Godwin.

"I underrated you," he said, and his voice was silky again, but not with danger. "You may be dead right about it. Strange, how often we can't see the wood for the trees! I figured that, as a source of supply, I was entirely safe. Hm!"

Godwin laughed with real amusement.

"If I was a crook, Fitz, I'd slap a bullet into you and take over the supply source myself. Well, I'm not interested. I want nothing out of it—not one damned cent of your money, now or in future, understand? No sermons, either. I just don't want any of the dope business—any, get it? If you do, then it's yours and that's not my affair."

"Damn you!" said Fitzhugh, and almost smiled. "Well, what do you want? Out with it!"

"You know. Change your plans. Scratch the judge off the slate completely. Keep this place; we'll take him away somewhere off the map and not interfere. That's all."

"You *are* a damned fool, aren't you?" said Fitzhugh amiably. "Oh, all right; it's a deal."

"Okay. But," said Godwin, suddenly earnest, "don't figure on bumping me off later to shut my mouth, for two reasons. First, I can shoot straighter and faster than you, and I've killed a lot of Nips, Fitz. Second, the blueprint of this whole layout will be on ice and will go to headquarters if I die suddenly. Are we agreed?"

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Fitzhugh inspected him with smoldering, red-sparking gaze.

"Up to a certain point I figured you right—only up to a point," he said. "It never occurred to me that a woman might change everything."

"Your mistake, Fitz." Godwin's eyes twinkled. "Are we agreed?"

"Absolutely. Will you—"

He extended a long, skinny hand. Godwin gripped it.

"I think," said Fitzhugh, "that you ought to be supplied with a gun."

"I am, thanks," Godwin replied.

"Oh!" The other showed his teeth in a sudden laugh. "I might have known it! Well, we'd better make ready for our guests. They're not staying the night, by the way—coming here an hour after dark. Sundown will be time enough for me to flit to the cave, eh? We'd better get a bite to eat first, then I'll send Bondy away for the evening."

THEY went back to the house together. To his inner delight, Godwin perceived clearly that, while Fitzhugh was capable of any treachery, for the moment the skinny man was deeply alarmed and acting in full sincerity of purpose. Godwin did not put an atom of credence in his own wild imagination; that the west coast tycoons of the dope ring would murder Fitzhugh to control his source of supply was, to him, rankly incredible. Fitz, however, gave it full credence, and Godwin chuckled to himself at the effect of his strategy.

He knew that, for the moment, Fitz was with him heart and soul. He also knew that, the critical moment past, Fitz would turn and rend him—somehow, as a matter of self-protection. But that could take care of itself.

The afternoon was running late. Fitzhugh had a truckload of furniture coming in a couple of days for the house; they discussed this, talked about running up a garage to shelter the light truck and the car from the sea air, and queried Bondy about a snack. The redhead promised sandwiches and coffee in ten minutes, and Fitzhugh promised a bottle of liquor and the evening off, in return.

The setting sun broke through the gray clouds, an inch above the horizon. Bondy took his bottle and departed for the Basque shacks. Sandwiches and coffee on a card table, Godwin and Fitzhugh sat down to their first meal in the new house, looking out at the restless sea. To his surprise, Godwin found the skinny man not only amenable but thoroughly satisfied with affairs.

"Plenty of time," said he, biting into a sandwich. "The meeting's scheduled for eight; it'll be dark a bit after seven. Two bigshots coming from Frisco, Jenner coming from closer at hand. I'll leave the place to you in half an hour—say, at seven—and stay gone until the cars leave."

"You'd better supply me with data for discussion with these birds," said Godwin. "I mean prices and so on."

The other nodded. "Of course. I can fix you up in five minutes. About the judge, now—perhaps it's just as well to have him out of the affair. I did plan to use him, but he's not too reliable. Yes, things have worked out okay."

"Glad you feel that way," said Godwin. "You say he and his daughter will clear out?"

"I think it's a safe bet; we've not discussed it. She wants to get him clear away from the whole thing. It'll be better to get him away from here entirely."

Fitzhugh nodded again. He was about to speak, when he suddenly checked himself, listening. His eyes lifted to meet those of Godwin; the two men sat motionless, as the throbbing hum of a car engine, close at hand, reached them. "What the hell!" exclaimed Fitzhugh.

Godwin rose. "Looks like somebody had jumped the gun on you," he said, smothering an oath, as the car came up beside the house and halted.

VII

"THIS here shore dinner ain't going to work out so good," observed Mr. Jenner, "so I'll be glad of a bite ahead of time. We can talk business while we eat."

Genial, ignoring all past unpleasantness with Godwin, quite cool and dominant, he settled himself at the card table and took a sandwich. The two men who had come with him, silent, watchful men of ominous alertness, took chairs and sat apart, separately. They kept hawk-eyes on Fitzhugh and

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Godwin. There had been no threats, no talk; they had just moved in, all three of them, and Jenner was in control of the situation.

"You see, Fitz," he said, "me and Godwin, here, didn't get on so good the other day, so I says to myself, why not go to the shore dinner ahead of time and get things understood? Good idee, so here I am. Too bad Judge Myers ain't here too."

Fitzhugh, as the lines about his mouth testified, had taken warning, but gave no other indication of it.

"Not a bad notion," he said easily, silkily. "We'll need an understanding all around, of course. Godwin is in with me."

"Yeah, so I gather." Jenner gave Godwin a glance from under his shaggy brows, and one corner of his steel-trap mouth lifted in a grimace. "You ain't by any chance set ag'in me, Godwin?"

The latter helped himself to a sandwich. "Well, you might call it that," he replied casually. "At the moment, I seem to be overruled. Fitz is running the show."

"Okay, that's fine," said Jenner, munching away. "You got a nice place here, Fitz. Kind of lonely and out of the way, ain't it? But that's what you want, of course. You've got regular shipments comin' in, I hear. Quite a lot of the stuff, too. I expect it'll be quite a big thing."

"Ought to be," Fitzhugh replied.

"Too big for one man to handle," Jenner said. "And there's no sense in letting too many in on the deal, Fitz. You and me, now, could be sitting pretty, with Judge Myers on the job. The judge knows a lot of smart legal angles, you bet."

"Get down to business," said Fitzhugh, a snap in his voice.

"Okay, good idee." Jenner finished his sandwich and wiped his hands on his trousers. He glanced around. "You got any lights here? It's gettin' dark in here already."

"Lanterns," said Fitz. "Godwin, get one out of the tent, will you?"

"Sure," Jenner added pleasantly. "Dutch, you help him."

Godwin rose. One of the two men also rose and preceded him to the door, and there waited, hand sliding under coat lapel. He followed Godwin closely to the tent, said nothing, watched alertly. Godwin ignored him, got a lantern and lit it, and came back to the house, still watched narrowly. He hung the lantern on a nail in the door-jamb and resumed his chair. Dutch did likewise.

"What you need, Fitz, is a good partner —a full partner," said Jenner. "Ain't it so?"

Fitz produced a cigar and bit at it. "I'm not convinced, Jenner, of the necessity. Suppose I disagreed?"

JENNER shook his head. "That'd be just too bad, Fitz. If you didn't have a partner to protect you against accidents, what might happen? Hard to say."

"Quit sparring," spoke out Godwin abruptly. "Jenner, I warned you not to come back here. Your two thugs look mighty big to you; not to us. You've got the notion that you can barge in and grab the big thing for yourself, eh?"

"Just half of it, Mr. Godwin," said Jenner mockingly. "Just half of it."

"Well, you'd better take your company back to the rat-house—"

"Easy, Godwin," spoke up Fitzhugh silkily, smoothly, warningly. "Easy, now. You'd better let me handle this."

"That's right," said Jenner, with a vicious look at Godwin. "Ain't no brushoff going on here, Godwin. You just relax, feller. Fitz knows his way around."

He glanced at Fitzhugh, whose lip curled in a sardonic grimace. Godwin wondered what was in the mind of the skinny man. He was aware of tightening tension. Outside it was growing dark. The two gunmen sat with hands openly ready to grab, close to loosened coats, gaze wary. Jenner was intent, nervous, masterful. Fitzhugh was elaborately at his ease.

Suddenly, in upon them broke a voice, cunning, chuckling, leering.

"Too late for supper, am I? Too bad."

Like shadows, the two gunmen were on their feet, pistols out. Jenner repressed them with a word and a swift gesture. Fitzhugh turned startled gaze to the door, Godwin caught his breath as a figure appeared there, its approach silent in the loose sand. Judge Myers, leaning on his stick, grinning in at them.

The weapons vanished. Jenner nodded greeting.

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"Howdy, judge. Glad to see you. Just showed up in time. Have a bite?"

"Oh, no. Had my supper long ago, thanks." Myers, hobbling inside, broke into a laugh. "Had my supper and sent to bed. I'm sound asleep there now. But I saw your car come and so I sneaked out for purposes of my own."

"You'd better go back to bed," barked Godwin.

"You're not yet my guardian, my dear fellow," said the judge amiably. He was, indeed, remarkably amiable, beaming on everyone. "Hello, all! Any seat to spare?"

Jenner gestured to Dutch, who brought forward his own chair and unfolded another. Myers sat down, sighed, and leaned on his stick. Godwin noted his high color, his sparkling eyes, and cursed to himself; the man was in high fettle, full of "happy dust"—while Rita supposed him safe in bed, he had probably resorted to some hidden store of the drug, and stolen forth. And now—what?

"I have business with you, Jenner, and with you, Fitzhugh—important business," said Myers impressively. "I've decided to take things into my own hands at last."

It was singular—Godwin could have sworn he saw a flash of fright in the sunken features of Fitzhugh. It warned him, tightened him in every nerve. Judge Myers had abruptly become the center of everything, dominating the whole scene. But Jenner leaned forward and grinned.

"All right, judge, all right," he said. "You know we're your friends—"

"No, it won't go, Jenner," broke in Myers, a sudden stream of purpose, of strength, breaking across his amiability. His smile vanished; his sparkling eyes hardened and firmed. His voice rang more surely and steadily. Before their very eyes, the man was changing. "It won't go. You two sewer-rats have made a wreckage of my life, and now it's ended forever. You think I'm a wretched weakling who will do your will. You think you can hound me into acting for you. But you are wrong, very wrong. I have others to think of beside myself."

Jenner gazed at him, startled, then shot a look at Fitzhugh.

The latter spoke. "I think you'll be surprised, judge, to know that we've already discussed matters and ruled you out of our business. If you'll step outside with Godwin, he can set your mind at ease."

"Yeah, that's right," said Jenner, taking his cue. "You and him take a little walk, and—"

Myers laughed. So strong and ringing was the laugh that it silenced Jenner on the instant, like a slap in the face. Godwin swallowed hard. Something horrible was in the air; he could not place it, but there it was—something strange and terrible, as though deadly forces had been loosed upon the room.

Judge Myers turned carefully, and with great care leaned his cane against the wall, then turned again. His hand brought up something and set it on the table and kept hold of it—an old-fashioned revolver, a huge old Navy or Army weapon. He held it pointed straight at Jenner and it was very steady in his grip.

"Here's your answer, Fitzhugh, and yours, Jenner," he cried, his wild bright gaze sweeping from one to the other. The two gunmen sat staring, gripping for their weapons, afraid to move. Jenner suddenly went white and staring. The revolver clicked; it was cocked.

"You two rascals have dragged me down through many years," the judge went on. "I've been a fool; now I'm going to make up for the past. This is my affair, and I'll handle it myself. What you do to me matters little; but what I do to you matters a great deal—get me? You grinning rats shall spread no more misery and ruin for the price of gain—I'm watching you, Fitz! Don't move, you yellow dog—I tell you—"

It was Jenner who moved—spreading his elbows as he leaned forward across the table, knocking the revolver aside with his hand, a sharp, incoherent cry bursting from him.

His cry was drowned in the deafening explosion of the revolver. Fitzhugh scooped a cup from the table; it smashed the lantern, but the stabbing red tongue of flame leaped again from the old weapon, and again. Fitz crashed down across the threshold of the door, just as the weapons of the two gunmen spurted flame.

Godwin, out of his chair and crouching at one side, fired twice at the spurts. His action was desperate, involuntary, spas-

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modic. Silence checked him; a frightful, deathly silence. He ventured a word; there was no answer.

After a moment he fumbled out a match, scratched it, and the flame wavered up. Judge Myers sat smiling at the dead, huddled figure of Jenner. Fitzhugh lay in the doorway, an unfired pistol in his hand, a bullet in his heart. The two bullets of the judge had gone to their mark. The two gunmen were sprawled beside their chairs; one gripped a mangled arm and cursed softly, staring at Godwin with frightened, panicky eyes, the other lay face up and blood dripped across his cheek—the bullet had ploughed across his scalp, no worse.

Godwin stepped to the table and looked at the judge. Myers did not move; his eyes were set and staring, his smile was set and stiff. A thread of scarlet was running out upon his shirt. Godwin swung around and his automatic jerked up. The wounded gunman uttered a harsh, wild cry of terror—but Godwin only took a step toward him and kicked the fallen pistol away, and picked it up.

"Better get your pal into your car and pull out," he said. "You'll not get far."

Then he stepped over the shape of Fitzhugh and was gone into the darkness.

VIII

GODWIN knocked and walked into the house.

Rita, standing in the living-room, met him with eyes of wide alarm.

"Were those shots?" she demanded.

He answered only with a reassuring gesture, and went into the hall, where the telephone was located. He sat down to the book, found his number, and called it.

"Sheriff's office? Cliff Godwin speaking, from Judge Myers' house at Viscaya. Two of Jenner's gunmen have killed the judge. They're just leaving here now—I can hear their car. Both are wounded. The judge shot Jenner, also a man named Fitzhugh, a cocaine importer, supposedly of Japanese blood. You'd better get busy and do it fast."

He hung up, ignoring a startled squawk of questions, and went back into the living-room. Rita stood frozen. He went to her, and slipped an arm about her shoulders.

"You heard what I said? A bad way to break it to you, sister; sorry. Now, look. I'm not skipping out. I'm seeing the thing through; it'll all come clear. We've got to make up our minds to face it all—scandal, maybe, publicity, everything. We can look it all in the eye and stare it down, can't we?"

A spasmodic contortion twisted her face, as she met his eyes.

"I—I don't—was it true? Father—"

"He sneaked over there—he said you thought he had gone to bed. He had that old gun of his, the one you couldn't find. He knew what he was doing; trying to make up, clean the slate—it was the only way out for him. You'd better go see him now; I'll take you over there, after a bit. He's smiling, sister. Smiling, understand?"

She broke into convulsive sobs, lowering her face into her hands. Godwin held her tightly.

"Cry it out; that's right," he said. "Get the shock over. God knows there was no way to stop it. I'll make up by helping you through it, if I can. I'm sticking around, understand? We'll see it through together."

She tried to speak and failed. Turning to him, she put both hands to his shoulders and looked up at him.

"You—you're a great guy, soldier," she said unsteadily.

He smiled. "Things are going to happen around here, when Fitzhugh's friends from Frisco get here—if they do. The sheriff's men will pick up those two rats who just left; I let 'em go with that in mind. Your dad sure went to town with those guys tonight, he sure did! You'd have been proud of him. We've got a long time ahead, Rita."

"For—for what?" she demanded.

"Us. The two of us. A new setup all around. Now go wash your mug and we'll slip over and say good-bye to your dad before the crowd comes."

She drew back, looked at him for a moment, then nodded and left the room. And what he saw in her gaze at that moment sent a surge of delighted happiness through him.

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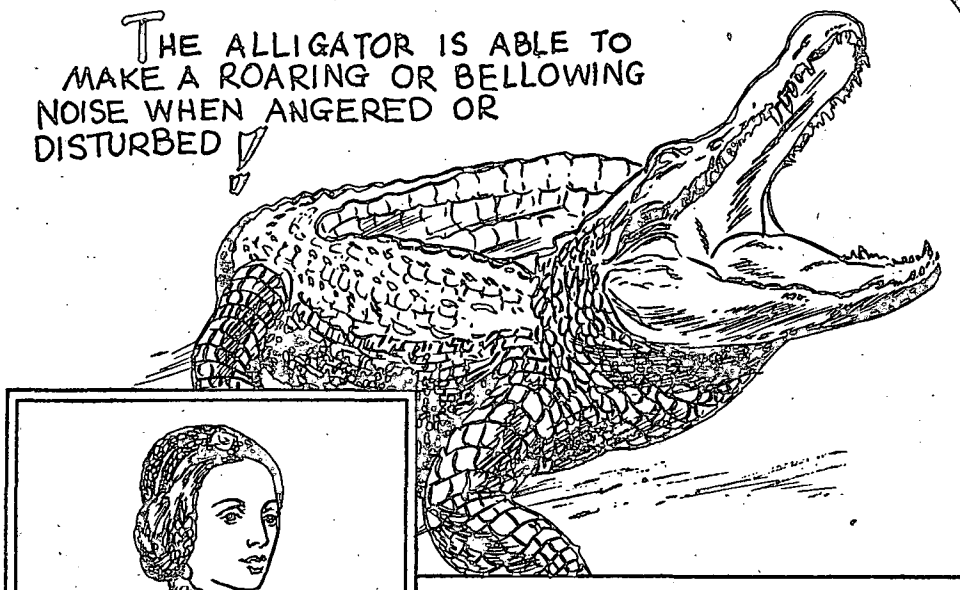
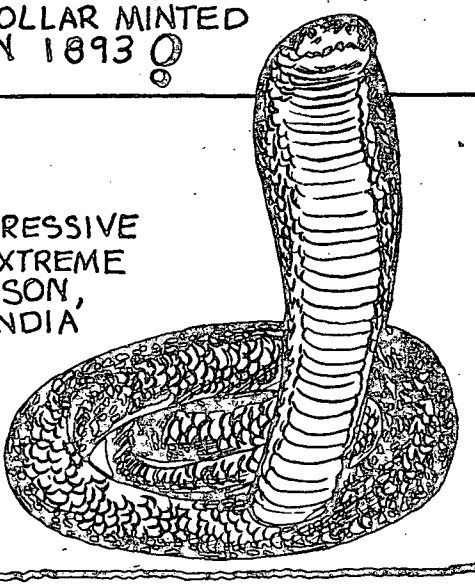
Curiodities

THE ALLIGATOR IS ABLE TO MAKE A ROARING OR BELLOWING NOISE WHEN ANGERED OR DISTURBED



QUEEN ISABELLA OF SPAIN WAS THE ONLY FOREIGN SOVEREIGN EVER PORTRAYED ON A U.S. COIN, HER BUST HAVING APPEARED ON A QUARTER DOLLAR MINTED IN 1893

BECAUSE OF ITS AGGRESSIVE DISPOSITION AND THE EXTREME VIRULENCE OF ITS POISON, THE KING COBRA OF INDIA IS BELIEVED TO BE *THE MOST POISONOUS SNAKE IN THE WORLD*



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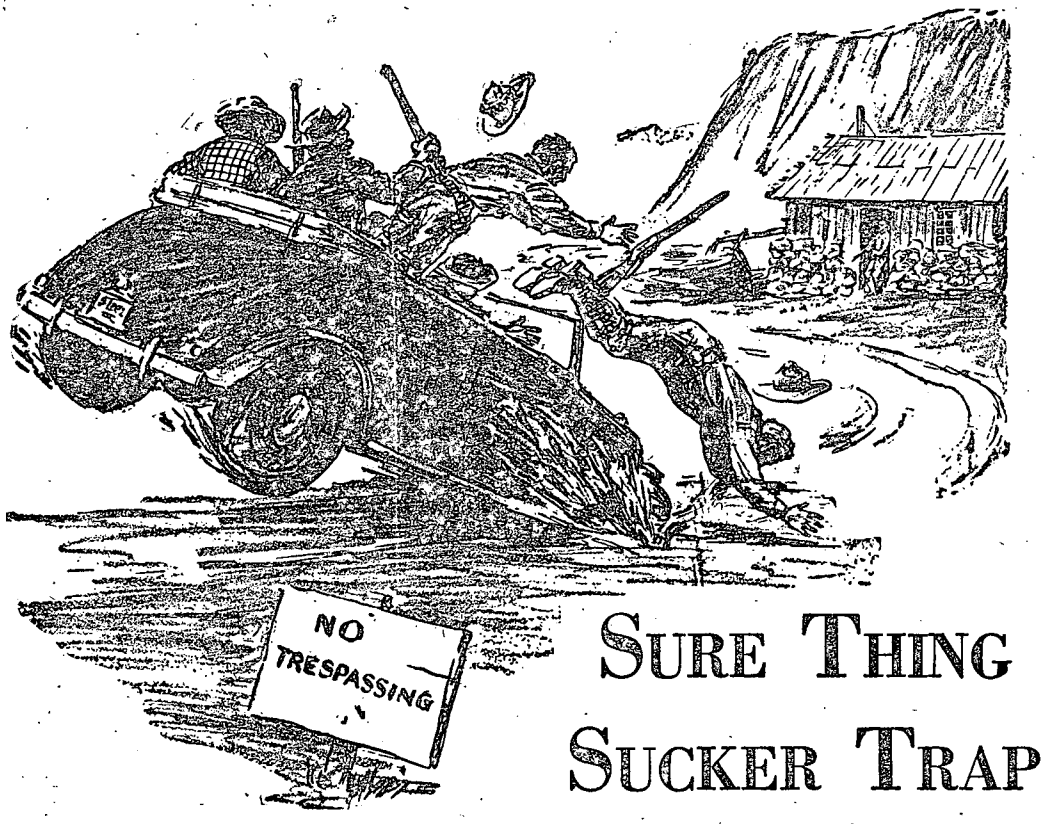
Betting on a Horse Race Isn't Gambling, Not for a Cowboy; and Other Chances Can Be Legitimate, Too



SURE THING SUCKER TRAP

By RAY PALMER TRACY

ALONG the tragedy-studded primrose road, there have been some exceedingly wild gambling chances taken. Sometimes they were bred of a pure gambling spirit. Often, desperation played a big part. And occasionally a character has bucked a sure thing sucker trap and busted the bank wide open.

A man has been known to take a lonely dollar and run it into a fortune. And if he didn't have heart failure, or try whipping his luck when it craved rest, he was in a position to retire to the fleshpots for the balance of his life.

Jess Archer never sat around a green-topped table studying the spots on cards for their own sake. He indulged in it only as a recreation and for small stakes, when he had time from his job as president and manager of the LB cow outfit. He would have resented the implication that he was a reckless gambler.

Maybe he was and maybe he wasn't. It depends on the point of view. For instance, betting on a horse race isn't gambling, not according to a cowboy. It's simply exercising your judgment in horseflesh, and showing confidence in yourself by investing a few dollars. Just a pure business proposition.

So again it comes back to point of view when judging Jess Archer for what he did with the horse race winnings of himself and three of his friends. He organized them into a corporation, acquired the deserted ranches of arid Jordan Valley, built a dam and turned the result into an imposing spread named the LB. At least the LB was imposing in size and the range it controlled. However, one look at the bank statement and into

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the bitter souls of those who had been limber-tongued into giving credit, destroyed the illusion.

At the minute, the LB was quivering on the edge of dropping into the past tense. There had been a drought last year and it had caused the outfit to use up its meager credit. But what appeared to be a really insurmountable catastrophe was Hardy Q. Kellogg of the Lockwood millions. Kellogg had gone into the cow business in an empire way. Already he had acquired most of the county on both sides of the LB, and was moving to close the gap.

The LB was already in the web and the spider was lying back enjoying the frantic struggles before leisurely moving in for the feast. That was when Jess called in the three other stockholders for a meeting and addressed them as follows:

"Look here you liberated serfs. Unless we raise some money for the bank, P.D.Q., it's back, back to the mines! Got any ideas?"

Gloomy Gus Nagle was named Gloomy because he was tall, lank and dreary looking. It wasn't because of his disposition which was the most optimistic of the four. Gloomy said, "Things is tough right now, but something will turn up. It always does."

Tiny Furso, five-foot-three of dynamite and loving a fight like a gamecock, nodded. "Yep," he said, "something will turn up. Prob'ly the sheriff with some disgusting legal papers." Then he asked, "Why don't we hold up a train or a bank?" His way of saying he had no ideas.

Jess turned to Ike Burrows, an extremely tall, slope-shouldered young man with a huge nose and a perfect rosebud of a mouth. "What you think, Ike?"

"Me think?" Ike stared at him in amazement. "You lost your mind? You do the thinking. That's why we elected you president. It's high time you earned the salary you ain't getting. Anyway," he added shrewdly, "you've got an idea of your own, or you wouldn't be weeding out all opposition to it in advance."

Jess grinned. "Something like that," he acknowledged. "You know the new oil strike way up north of Stage Station, on the Red Desert. It seems the anticline runs south and they figger oil will be found in any high along it, according to what I read in the papers.

"Them lucky enough to stake a claim on a high will automatically wear silver spurs and smoke fifty-cent cigars. My scheme is for me to hit out of here and file on a claim on the anticline as near as I can get to the discovery well. Then I'll set there and wait till someone in the know comes along and tells me if I'm trying to hatch out an egg or a doorknob."

"Strikes me as a wonderful opportunity," grinned Gloomy, "if you forget to take a look at the odds."

"What we got to lose?" inquired Tiny.

"I still ain't thinking," Ike gave his consent.

"Carried," announced Jess. "Now I gotta have some expense money." He emptied his pockets. The loot was fifty dollars and ten cents.

"You've been holding out on us," accused Ike. "Now me," he explained virtuously, "I was just hanging onto this eighty-seven dollars so we could eat whilst looking for jobs."

"This hundred and five dollars and six cents," spoke up Tiny, "I've saved dime by dime to take a correspondence course in magic. This is it."

Gloomy pulled out a battered pocketbook. "Here goes the money I was saving to buy my girl an engagement ring," he sighed and laid one hundred and ninety-two dollars on the line.

"If there was one or two more of us we'd be out of debt," commented Jess putting the money away. An hour later he was in the old pick-up and headed north.

JESS got a claim on the anticline. Also, he ran afoul of Hardy Q. Kellogg, who, not content with trying to hog the cow range, was busily trying to grab all the oil claims in sight. He had been hiring men to take up claims on the anticline. That was strictly against the law, if it could be proven.

The only reason Jess got a well-located claim was because Kellogg had run out of men to hire. The way he bellyached, it gave the impression that Jess had picked his pocket. He offered Jess a hundred dollars to get out. Jess wasn't interested in chicken feed, so he went ahead, built his cabin and started holding down his claim.

A couple of nights later, when he woke out of a sound sleep and picked himself out of the debris where the cabin shelves had

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spewed their burden on the floor, he was suspicious that Kellogg hadn't taken his refusal to sell as final word. The cabin was bumping along the rough ground behind a truck. He tried to reach the door, but couldn't make it.

Whirling around, he dove for the window. Just as his fingers reached for a hold, the cabin hit something and he was hurled back among the dishes, stove and bedding at the lower end. A few more bounces and the cabin came to rest.

There was a rasping swish as the wire cable around the cabin was cast off. The motor of the big truck roared as it was fed the gas and went away from there at racing speed.

Jess got his feet under him, rushed to the door and flung it open. The skyline, instead of being on a level with him, had risen many feet. Just as he had thought, his cabin had been dragged down into the wide gulch west of his claim and dumped.

Feeling his way over the tilted floor, he groped around till he located his levis and got some matches from a pocket. Lighting one, he discovered his lantern leaning drunkenly against the wall. Raising the globe, he lighted the wick.

"They sure as hell made a job of it," he commented, taking a gander at the ruin.

Everything was piled against the lower end of the cabin. The bunk was still in place because it was nailed to the wall. But the mattress was wrapped around the stove which had moved from where it should be to yonder. He found his rifle under his suitcase, it having made the trip across the floor from where it stood at the head of the bunk, along with Jess and everything else.

"There's one advantage in being so poor you don't own much," decided Jess as he set to work to straighten out the mess. The only real damage done aside from wracking the cabin askew at the corners, was a broken plate and cup, his entire stock of chinaware.

The bunk tilted with the cabin until its foot was a good six inches lower than its head. But Jess hung his lantern back on the nail at the bunk's head, spread his blankets and turned in.

Ten minutes later, he rose in the dark and quietly dressed. He knew very well he had been watched as he straightened things up and went back to bed. He thought his best bet was to act as though he was accepting the underhanded blow dealt him.

Taking his rifle with him, he crept out of the cabin. Guiding himself by the trickle of water from the big spring in the gulch, he made for the road which lay in the one spot where a truck could get down into the gulch from the east rims. For that matter, the walls of the gulch were nothing to be climbed in the dark by anyone on foot.

Someone would be guarding the roadway at the top. But not far below the head of the grade there was a way to get around the final, narrow chute. Jess took a chance that those who had moved his cabin from his claim did not know about it. In the dark, he safely made the detour and came out on top where he could look across the flat where his cabin had stood until a few minutes ago.

Lights were moving about at the cabin site. The claim jumpers evidently thought they had Jess where he could do no harm. And after estimating the number of men engaged at his old cabin site, he was inclined to agree.

Another cabin was being placed on his site. It was done with an efficiency that Jess admired, even if it had snatched what he hoped would turn into a rescuing fortune out of his grasp.

Within an hour there was a light in the cabin and several men had moved in. Plenty to hold the fort, to say nothing of the guard who was certain to be at the head of the grade. So Jess returned to his own cabin and went to bed. Tomorrow was another day.

The chief thing Jess had been worrying about was his old pick-up car. It wasn't worth much, but it was all the transportation he had. It was one reason why he hadn't taken a few shots at the new cabin of the outfit which had jumped his oil claim and tumbled him and his outfit into the gulch. Such men could be counted on to take revenge and his old car would be handy.

JESS could have saved himself the worry. The first thing he saw the next morning was his car sitting out in the sagebrush not far from his cabin. The claim jumpers had pushed the car to the head of the grade and let 'er go.

Nine times out of ten the car would have wound up in the sink hole at the lower end

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of the bowl-like tract. There the water from the spring at the head of the bowl sank from sight in a sort of quagmire. The sink hole would have swallowed the pick-up beyond recovery. But a rock had turned the car and headed it up the bowl. It had come to a stop with no more damage than a few new scratches.

Jess got in the car and drove up on the flat. No one stopped him. Following the road he had made for himself, he drove to the new cabin that was sitting where his had stood the night before. When he stopped and honked, a man with a long face and little ears set close to his head stepped into the door and carelessly pointed a rifle in Jess' direction.

LEANING over the car door, Jess said, "I've got some wood and coal here you forgot to move last night."

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," came the cold answer. "All I know is Hardy Q. Kellogg don't allow trespassing on his claim. Move on!"

"You ain't going to let me have my wood and coal?" asked Jess.

"Git!" The rifle steadied.

Jess drove back to the gulch. As he had thought, Kellogg was the man who had moved him off his claim. It wasn't only that Kellogg coveted the claim, he was also making sure that Jess acquired no sudden wealth to keep the LB from being snatched from his grasp.

The claim was still registered in Jess' name, but he had small chance of ever getting it back with the witness all stacked against him. He went into the cabin, sat down and contemplated ways and means.

The thought that came to him was attractive in many facets. "With this light soil, it ought to work," he decided. He got in his car and pulled out for Stage Station, the county seat, forty miles to the southeast and on the other side of Desolation Mountains.

"If they strike oil around there, you would have a market for everything you can raise in the bowl. There's plenty of irrigating water in the spring." Thus spoke the land commissioner when Jess filed on a homestead covering the gulch bowl and taking in a wide strip on each side of the gulch, including the surface rights where two of Kellogg's camps were located. That accomplished, he filed on all water rights to the spring.

From the land office, Jess went to the hotel and wrote a letter to the boys at the LB. Next he stretched the elastic in his few remaining dollars to the limit. He got a few supplies, some necessary tools and rented a small tractor. Then he hired a big truck to take his new possession to his cabin in the gulch.

Throwing a cable around his cabin, he took the tractor and hauled it to a spot under an overhanging bluff. It placed the building in complete protection from anything but a frontal attack.

Jess then stoned up the front of the cabin to more than breast high. A galvanized barrel he had picked up in town, he sank below the spring to serve as a catch basin. Then he laid a pipe line the hundred yards to a natural hollow in the rocks beside his cabin under the overhang. With a little cement, he fixed a reservoir that would hold several thousand gallons of water. Below the reservoir he made a loading rack.

The men in the Kellogg camps on both sides of the gulch came down daily to the spring for water. They watched Jess' activities, but asked no questions, not even when Jess hooked the tractor to a plow and began plowing up the ground all around the spring.

Next day a car drove up to his cabin. In it sat Hardy Q. Kellogg and a pair of his gunmen. Jess had been expecting the visit and stepped into the doorway with his rifle. He leaned against the door casing and crossed his legs companionably, but was in position to instantly duck behind his stone barricade, something Kellogg and his gunmen were quick to appreciate.

Kellogg got out of the car. He was of medium height and of stocky build. He was blond and arrogant with a contemptuous manner bred from many years of overestimating his value. His dress for this occasion was that of a big-shot oil promotor with expensive, tailored breeches and high-laced boots.

His shirt was of fine quality and open at the throat. An ivory-handled gun rode in an ornate holster.

Backed by his two cold-eyed gunmen, Kellogg swaggered toward the cabin as though he expected to take full possession.

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"That's far enough," said Jess without moving or raising his voice.

Kellogg took one more step and then stopped. "What's biting you, Archer?" he demanded.

"Not a thing," said Jess. "And I don't aim to let you get close enough so I'll ketch any bugs crawling around on you."

"I can talk to you from here," said Kellogg.

"If you talk, you will," agreed Jess.

"I see you've got the water fixed up nice and handy for me to load when I start drilling in a couple of days," said Kellogg. "That loading rack will save me a lot of trouble. I'll give you fifty dollars for the layout and you can go back to the LB and start picking up your clothes."

"I've spent more than fifty dollars fixing this up," said Jess.

"That's your hard luck," pointed out Kellogg. "Fifty dollars is all I can afford to pay."

"S'posen I don't want to sell?"

"You had one sample of what happens when you buck me," reminded Kellogg, grinning confidently. "Want another demonstration?"

"I'll think it over," stalled Jess.

"I'll give you till tomorrow night." Kellogg turned and swaggered away with his two gunmen at his heels.

LATE that evening, an old club roadster nosed cautiously into the gulch and stopped at the cabin. Out of it crawled Gloomy Gus, Tiny and Ike, followed by Bingo, the dog. Yellow, the cat, stuck his head out of a box, saw Jess and uttered yells of protest.

"We got your letter," said Gloomy. "We done like you said and turned out everything that et grass. But there was pore old Bingo and Yellow. We just loaded 'em in and fetched 'em along. Prob'ly they'd like to see the fun anyways."

"That's using your heads," said Jess. "But don't it beat all hell how much one of them club roadsters will hold?"

"You ain't seen nothing yet," chuckled Ike. "We've got all them things you told us to fetch in the back."

"You only hinted at the situation in the letter," said Tiny. "What's the real low-down on this oil-claim business?"

"Come in the cabin while I cook you birds some supper and I'll tell you about it," said Jess.

The next morning, at daybreak, Jess was out with the tractor finishing the plowing around the spring. Then he plowed several furrows across the road to the cabin and laid planks over the strip. Next he plowed the ground on both sides of the cabin road. Coupling a big hose to the loading-rack pipe, he let the water flow into the plowed area.

The light soil soaked up the water like a sponge and turned the plowed ground into a quagmire like the sink hole. Before the sun was three hours high, there was no way to get water from the spring save at the loading rack.

Even the far reaches of the plowed ground were turning into thin mud, when Tom Riley, roustabout from the drilling camp on the west side drove into the gulch. In his pick-up were a half-dozen milk cans to be filled with water for camp use.

Experienced in the country, the roustabout stopped when he came to the wet plowed ground. He knew that sort of soil. Seeing no way to reach the spring, he drove to the loading rack. Jess stepped into the door of the cabin. "Looking for something, Riley?" he asked.

"I'm after water for the camp," said Riley uneasily. "You've got us cut off from the spring."

"You can get water here at the loading rack, if you've got the money," explained Jess.

"Money! You gone crazy?" demanded Riley. "The water's free!"

"Your mistake," corrected Jess. "It used to be free. I've filed on a homestead here and also filed on the water rights of the spring. The water is mine."

Riley knew about water rights and was impressed. "What you figger to charge?" he asked.

"Fifty cents a can for them milk cans. You've got five. That will be two and half —in advance."

"Two—" Riley's mouth fell open. "Now I know you're crazy!"

"All right, haul it from Stage Station, if you figger it's cheaper," suggested Jess.

Suddenly Riley grinned. "I'll let Kellogg talk to you," he said and drove away.

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The three who had arrived last night had kept out of sight in the cabin. Tiny rubbed his hands.

"That ought to make Kellogg plenty mad," he chuckled.

"We've got work to do," broke in Jess. "Get out them NO TRESPASS signs and put 'em up by the road at the foot of the grade, one each side. Then take up them planks where Riley crossed the soft spot in the road."

That finished, the boys went back in the cabin to wait. It wasn't long till Kellogg's car came roaring down the grade. There were half a dozen men in it and rifles bristled like the guns of an armored division.

"I'll bet," prophesied Tiny, "this is going to be a jolly party."

THE cut place in the road was narrow, but Jess had stirred water into it until it was a thin goo more than a foot deep. He had just sprinkled fresh earth over it until it looked solid.

The speeding car, intending to dash up to the cabin and deploy an overwhelming cloud of men on a supposedly lone defender, hit the soft spot. The front wheels dropped and the bumper rammed into solid ground. The rear end of the car rose up and then banged down. Kellogg who was sitting beside the driver commanding the operation, sort of rose up and dove frog fashion over the windshield and scooted along the ground on his stomach.

A man who tried the same trick from the back seat, misjudged the distance. He hung over the windshield limp as a dirty shirt with all the wind knocked out of him. The others, realizing they were sitting ducks for anyone in the cabin, untangled themselves. They hit the ground right and left only to mire in the soft mud until they could hardly move.

Jess stepped into the door. "Can't you read, Kellogg?" he inquired. "There's a big NO TRESPASS sign at the base of the grade. I've a good notion to have you arrested."

Kellogg got to his feet and staggered around dazedly. Jess had a suspicion he was not so badly jarred as he let on. "You tried to kill me!" accused Kellogg, "And that's against the law!"

"You don't say," said Jess with extreme surprise. He watched Kellogg edge nearer, but pretended he didn't notice.

Suddenly Kellogg whipped out his gun and covered Jess. "Got you this time," he crowed, his teeth showing in a wide grin. "I'll teach you to play tricks on a Kellogg." He came on rapidly, ready to let drive if Jess made a move.

Kellogg was ten feet from the door when a heavy voice issued from a loophole at the far end of the cabin. It said, "Handsome, drop that ivory-handled toy before I put a thirty-thirty slug right between your horns!"

KELLOGG stopped. He was so stunned, he just stood there, his jaw dropped and his gun extended.

Tiny at the loophole at the other end of the cabin couldn't resist temptation. His rifle cracked and the extended gun in Kellogg's hand went streaking through the air. Kellogg let out a loud grunt, grasped his wrenched wrist and began to swear.

"Shut up!" said Jess. "And come closer. I've got a few words to say."

"Move!" supplemented Gloomy's heavy tones.

Kellogg threw a wild glance toward his men who were still struggling in the mud. The shot had drawn their startled attention to the cabin, but they were in no position to help their chief. Kellogg swallowed and stepped up front of the door. "I'm going to bring out Sheriff Bat Neel and put you in jail for so long the bugs will drag you out the keyhole!" he threatened.

"Bat's son trucked my stuff out to the claim you dragged my cabin off of," said Jess. "We understand each other pretty good. Go right ahead and get Bat. It'll be quite a conference before it's settled."

Kellogg tried to peer in the door and see how many men were in there. He knew there were at least two besides Jess, and he didn't need a blueprint to show him that he had hit a real snag. He didn't dare bring out the sheriff, and Jess knew he didn't.

"Damn it, I've got to have water—a lot of it—for my drilling outfits!" he said.

"I'll sell you all you need," offered Jess.

"I offered you fifty dollars to move out," reminded Kellogg.

"You ain't setting the price on this. I wouldn't think of selling out. Me and a few friends figger this is just the place we want

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to start a new cow outfit, if we should lose the LB."

"Cow outfit!" snorted Kellogg. "With no grass outside of this little plot for near a hundred miles?"

"We've got water to grow grass," said Jess. "And we figger on starting a dairy for the oil fields. We don't like to spare any water, but we'll let you have it at the rate of ten dollars per load for the size tank trucks the contractors for your two wells have got. They told me you contracted to furnish the water for both tests."

Kellogg jumped like he had been stung. "Ten dollars a load!" he yelled. "That's highway robbery! Why it'll take ten loads a day to keep both the outfits going!"

"Yeah. That's what we figgered."

"I won't pay it!"

"Suit yourself," said Jess. "For all I care, you can haul your water from Stage Station. That's forty miles and on the other side of Desolation Mountains. An eighty-mile trip for each load. Maybe you can do it cheaper than ten dollars per load—if you can get enough tank trucks to keep both the east and west test going."

Kellogg began to sweat. "It would cost me thousands," he said.

"Should I feel bad about that?" inquired Jess.

"I won't be robbed this way!" balked Kellogg.

"You've been acting like you thought you was Lord God Almighty," said Jess. "Now comes the time for paying for the privilege."

"Ain't a thing I can do but agree," Kellogg caved in. "I might's well be a sport and act like I liked it. You let the boys fill up here. Keep track of it. Soon's the job is over, I'll give you a check."

"Sorry. This is a corporation. One of the rules is cash on the barrel head, in advance."

"I ain't got that much cash on me," Kellogg tried again.

"Go get it. I've got plenty of time."

Kellogg didn't have any time to spend. His two outfits were ready to go. Delay on his part would cost him more than the water for the boilers, drilling, and for the camps. He took out his pocketbook and counted out a hundred dollars. "Ten loads!" he snarled. "And I'll see you burning in hell before this is over!"

"Where you expecting to stand when you watch me burn?" inquired Jess pocketing the money.

"Get that tractor of yours and pull my car out of that trap you set!" ordered Kellogg savagely.

Jess looked at the men deployed with rifles, waiting to take a hand, if given a chance. "That," he said, "will be another hundred dollars, in advance." He had noticed the roll Kellogg carried and was sure there wasn't another hundred in it.

Kellogg turned and fairly ran back to the car. He called his men. With everyone lifting, they got the car out and backed to where it could be turned around.

Jess and the boys went out and replaced the planking over the soft spot on the road and went back to the cabin to wait. In about an hour, a tank truck showed up. The driver put his truck on the loading rack. "Fill 'er up," he grinned.

With the reserve in the reservoir, Jess had no trouble in keeping enough water ahead for the trucks. The next morning, Kellogg came with another hundred dollars and demanded a receipt.

"No receipt," said Jess. "You either buy on my word or take your business somewhere else." There was going to be no written evidence to be used later, especially evidence that didn't show the true state of affairs.

JESS and his three partners kept a close watch for tricks, but Kellogg seemed to have given up any idea of breaking the set-up. In fact, they were so rooted it would have required a full-scale war to dislodge them. However, they began to run low on grub. Also, they had three thousand dollars in cash to bank.

Ike was chosen to drive the pick-up to Stage Station, bank the money and lay in fresh supplies. With his rifle and six-gun on the seat beside him, he pulled out of the gulch at daybreak. He figured to be back by early afternoon.

But Ike didn't return in early afternoon. Evening came and he was still missing. Jess was worried. "Something has happened to Ike," he said. "Either that, or he's had car trouble."

"Maybe a couple of us better take the roadster and go see what we can find," suggested Tiny.

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"If Kellogg has got his hands on Ike, that's what he'll be waiting for us to do," said Jess.

While they were arguing about it, Ike came limping to the cabin on foot.

"I was up in Desolation Mountains when a car overtook and passed me like a bat outa hell," Ike told his story. "Didn't seem to be only the driver in it and I couldn't see his face. I figger now that there was four others in the car hunched down out of sight.

"Anyway, about a mile on, there was a boulder in the road. I got out to move it and five masked men with guns walked out from behind a rocky point. They took the three thousand and then shoved the pick-up into the canyon with my guns still on the seat; smashed the car all to hell. They marched me off the road, tied me up and left.

"It took me a couple of hours to get loose and crawl down into the canyon for my guns. I wouldn't be here yet, only one of Kellogg's drivers came along. I happened to be holding my six-gun pointed in his direction when I asked him for a ride. So he agreed to deliver me to the top of the grade. I got this limp when I fell the last fifteen feet into the canyon where the pick-up and my guns were."

"Recognize any of the gang?" asked Jess.

Ike shook his head. "Not for sure. One of them looked like the guy who hung over Kellogg's windshield the day he tried to leapfrog it and missed. You remember how he was built, long arms and neck. Anyway, I'm sure the car belongs to the driller on the east test."

THE next morning, when Kellogg came down to pay for his ten loads of water in advance, his good humor was noticeable. Some of his joy in the day departed when Jess shoved his money back. "Now what's wrong?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Conditions have changed," said Jess. "Our overhead has become so high we've got to have more money."

"Not out of me!" refused Kellogg violently.

"Then no more water!" Jess closed the door in Kellogg's face.

"Wait a minute." Kellogg was up against it. He just had to have that water. "How much is the boost in price?"

"Water, from now on until we get caught up on our unexpected outlay, will cost you twenty dollars per load!"

Not a word was said about the robbery on Desolation Mountains, but it was lying there between them.

Kellogg squirmed as he laid two hundred dollars on the barrel head. It had always been him who had turned on the heat. Being on the receiving end made him wild.

Jess and his partners still had to have supplies. This time Ike went in the middle of the night and made it through. He was back in camp before noon.

ON THE sixty-first day of the two wildcat tests, Jess shoved back a hundred of the money Kellogg put up. Jess grinned and Kellogg ground his teeth. While Jess had been unable to do anything directly about the robbery on Desolation Mountains, Kellogg was helpless to prevent him from taking the money back through a boost of water prices.

Once again in the night, Ike carried the money to Stage Station. This time Gloomy Gus went with him as a guard. They banked the cash, got fresh supplies and were home in the canyon by noon.

"Oil or no oil," exulted Gloomy, "we've got enough money to tide us over till we have some LB beef to sell. It's a hell of a note that this business is going on the rocks quick as them wells are drilled."

"If they hit oil, they'll drill more wells," pointed out Tiny.

Jess shook his head. "Kellogg will sell out and we couldn't throw the hooks into anyone else, even if we had a chance. The way Kellogg tried to crook us, he don't dare cheep about our sticking him for water, for fear he'll land in jail himself."

It took ninety days to finish the east test to the objective sand, and the west test was ninety-three days on the job. Both wells came in dry as dehydrated popcorn.

"Fellers," said Jess, "my intuition tells me we'd better load our coupé with Yellow, Bingo and ourselves, together with anything handy, and shake the dust. We've got around three thousand dollars in cash and Kellogg knows it as well as we do."

It was almost dark when they pulled out. They reached a point on Desolation Mountains where they could look back into the

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flat below. The lights of a car were speeding after them.

"They'll overtake this puddle jumper sure, unless we do something about it," said Jess. "Let's play their own trick on 'em."

Well up toward the top of the grade, they stopped long enough to roll a huge boulder into the road behind them, and then goosed the old roadster over the divide.

"When they see that rock," said Jess, "they ought to remember what they done to Ike. It'll take 'em the best part of half an hour to make sure they ain't running into an ambush. After all, there's plenty of us to make a good one. A half-hour is all the extra time we need."

"And if they ain't fooled?" inquired Tiny.

"We'll have to fight our way to Stage Station."

However, the ruse worked. As they entered the main street of Stage Station, lights which had been suggestively long in showing behind them, grew brighter with great rapidity and overtook the laboring old coupé.

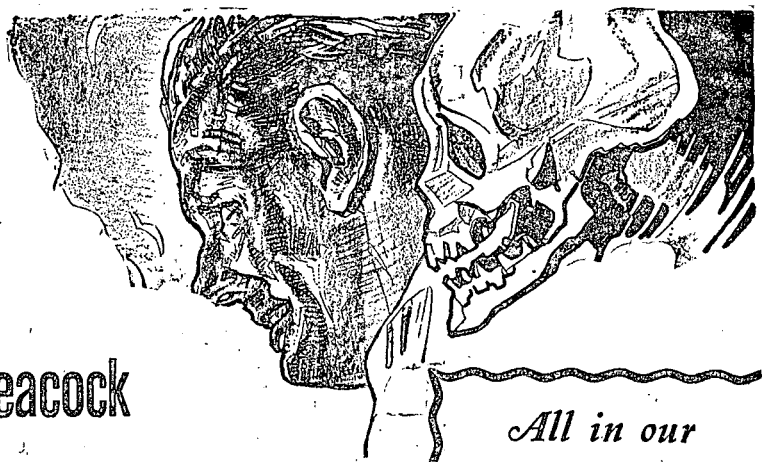
But it was too late to do Kellogg any good. Jess grinned at his enraged face as his car swept past.

The next afternoon, Jess and the other LB boys were headed back to the home range. Gloomy Gus remarked, "I like the oil business. We never could have made so much money so quick any other way."

"What oil business?" inquired Ike.

"It was water business," said Tiny. Then, overcome with doubt, he looked at Jess, the one who answered all questions. "It was water business, eh, Jess?"

"Water business?" repeated Jess. "Hardly. I know a little story that illustrates the kind of business we've been in up to our necks. Listen. 'Once upon a time, there was a monkey and a parrot—' "



"COP'S HOLIDAY"

by

Wilbur S. Peacock

Murder at the gun-club—and three confessions seemed two too many . . . . . .

All in our Next issue

A Stirring Tale

CADDO CAMERON

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A Long Novelette

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SHORT STORIES June 10th

BULL PEN BENNY

by

William S. Herman

In the clutch, it's the head that counts!

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"Watch Your Step Till You Get Past Skeleton Island . . . . "

HEART OF THE BADLANDS

By JIM CHAPMAN

ROD WEST frowned in a puzzled sort of way and glanced through the willows toward the tiny village which nestled under the fringe of the badland hills. Then he went on checking the food supplies and carrying them to the edge of the river where the canoe was waiting.

It was fully two hours since his partner had left on the pretext of buying cigarettes. He had gone with the old riverman who had come, well-meaning enough, to warn them.

"You'll never make it to the other side," the stranger had vowed. "I've been through, and I know. A sixteen-foot boat is bad enough, but a canoe!" The old-timer shook his head. "You've gotta watch them undercurrents!" he said.

During all the previous day it had

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seemed to Rod that his partner was stalling. Bill Forsythe had insisted upon waiting until morning before they left, and now he had disappeared. Rod was anxious to leave. Before them lay the unknown, the badlands of Alberta. They beckoned to the core of Rod's young nature. It wasn't the fact that these wild hills had the reputation of being dangerous that lured him, although that did add to the interest. It was his professional interest that drove him on. Here lay the ancient deltic and fluvial deposits that had already produced more fine specimens than any other field in the entire world. There were regions, accessible only by water, which had never been explored by an paleontologist, and this was where they were going. Rod's ambition was to discover the skeleton of a hooded duckbilled dinosaur, *(Corythosaurus)*.

As he carried the next load of duffel, Rod looked eastward down the Red Deer Valley to where the badlands towered up, looking blue and foreboding in the morning light. Even the water of the river looked sinister where it plunged between two jutting cliffs a mile away.

ROD had often heard that people feared the treacherous Red Deer River, and the badlands. But even so it was a surprise, soon after they arrived, to have an old Scot come with advice.

"Ye'll no cum oot!" he had said. "Ye'll be lak ol' Hardy. He went doon the river a-lookin' fer beaver an' he ain't been heard o' since!"

Rod had listened courteously, then explained, "I'm used to bad water. I think that we'll make it all right, but thanks for the warning."

Somehow his appearance justified his words. His khaki clothes were well filled and they seemed moulded to his six-foot frame, like an otter in its skin. He had an outdoor look that fitted into the scene.

Rod was tightening the straps on his bedroll when his little terrier rose from under a nearby willow clump and growled.

"It's all right, Tess," said the man, "that's Bill coming. Now we'll be able to leave."

A tall, fair-haired man approached, walking quickly. He was younger than Rod by several years and his eyes didn't have the same calm dependable look. He even seemed nervous.

Rod looked up and grinned. "All set?" he asked.

The younger man looked at him stonily, then lowered his eyes. "I'm not going," he said. "Call me a quitter if you like, but I'm through!"

ROD sobered at once. He wasn't altogether surprised, but the new turn of events would upset well-laid plans. Thoughtfully he pulled a comb from his pocket and ran it through his unruly brown hair. Ever since he'd kicked himself out of college ten years before he had been handling men. It had been his inability to swallow a tongue-lashing from a bigoted professor that had sent him packing. The same sturdy individuality had soon placed him head and shoulders above the average in a he-man's world. However, experience had taught him to hold a rein on his tongue and it was only after due consideration that he spoke.

"These old-timer's stories have got on your nerves," he said at last. "There's no doubt that these badlands are dangerous if you don't watch your step, and this river isn't exactly a creek. But I've used a canoe on rivers like this before, and you aren't exactly a greenhorn yourself. All we've got to do is use a bit of common sense."

"A man's a fool to risk his neck!" snapped Bill Forsythe. "Let some of those big fellows from that American museum come up here and gather their own information. You've heard just as much as I have about the Red Deer. If I believed only half of what I've heard I still wouldn't go!"

Rod saw that it was useless to argue with the man. His nerve was gone and he would be an added risk. In an emergency he would probably lose his head and that would be the end of them both.

"Okay," he said, "gather up your stuff and help me get loaded. I'm going alone!"

The younger man stared at him in disbelief. "You're crazy!" he gasped. "Why, it's dangerous!"

Rod chuckled. "It will be a bit risky alone," he admitted, "but I was born lucky. Anyway, you know what this trip means to me."

Rod didn't know whether Bill Forsythe

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knew very much or not, but he did know a little. What Rod wasn't telling was that he had a letter in his pocket offering supervision of excavation work for the museum —provided he found worthwhile deposits.

A dozen men gathered to see him off. At the last minute the old riverman drew him aside.

"I admire your guts, but I'm sorry to see you tackle it, fella. Here's a last word of advice. Watch your step till you get past Skeleton Island, that's what I called it because skeletons are the first thing you think of when you see it."

"How come?" Rod asked curiously.

The old riverman chuckled. "Don't ask me why son, but you'll recognize it sure enough. Anyway it's a bad place. After you're past the island there's clear sailin'."

ON THE first night Rod camped in a small cottonwood grove about fifteen miles from his starting point. The valley had become narrow and vegetation was only to be seen close to the river. The hills and cliffs were barren. Even the cottonwoods seemed grotesque and stunted.

The next morning he went on. The ugly looking cliffs closed in and the valley became a gorge. It was an awe-inspiring wilderness of sandstone cliffs and crags, intermixed with raw looking peaks of yellow clay. Caves glared at him out of sheer walls, like great black eyes.

From his map he knew that he was further than any other expedition had ever gone by land. Rod began to watch the strata of the cliffs more closely. It was noon before he made camp on a rocky shelf. His experienced eyes had told him that here lay the fossil beds that he was seeking, if he could find them.

After a hasty lunch he set out, climbing upward. Often he stopped to rest and examine the cliffs and slopes around him. It was a scene of utter desolation. The only living thing in sight was a falcon which alternately sailed above him chattering, or perched on the tip of a nearby pinnacle. To add to the weird effect there were veins of red clay running across the hillsides, and others of yellow. Occasionally he saw a narrow vein of coal. It seemed indeed to be a scene from the dead and ancient past.

Here and there the ground sounded hollow underfoot. In other places there were gaping holes which seemed to drop into the very bowels of the earth. Rod tossed a rock into a large one. For several seconds there was silence, then a hollow rattle and finally a distant thud.

Within an hour he found evidence of fossilized remains that caused his eyes to blaze with excitement. In the gullies petrified wood was heaped up, and among it lay bits of petrified bone, proof of the richness of nearby deposits. All afternoon he explored the region and at nightfall returned to camp, rich in new knowledge. Already he had found and marked on his map sufficient deposits to warrant an excavating expedition. The success of his trip was assured.

The next morning he paddled still deeper into the badlands. Twice during the day he scaled the cliffs. The deposits were so rich that he could scarcely believe his eyes. He became impatient. Only when he could return with equipment and men to help him would he know the full value of his discoveries.

More miles passed behind him. Toward late afternoon he began to watch for a place to make camp. There was no level ground to put up a tent. In many places the cliffs came right down to the water. To make matters worse the river had become swift.

It was then that the wind came howling down the gorge behind him. It struck like a tidal wave, almost capsizing his canoe. Waves rose and his craft began to bounce wildly.

Tess, like her master, was water wise. When the wind hit she flattened herself on the tarpaulin cover which was spread over Rod's provisions, bedroll, and rifle. Her head lay flat on her paws and she stared straight ahead.

Rod looked at her and grinned. "You're one partner that's got confidence in my canoemanship," he said, skillfully steadying the craft with the blade of his paddle.

THE wind whisked them on, and the current added its speed. The miles raced past and Rod lost all track of how far he had come. He cast hasty glances at the shores, hoping to see a suitable place to camp. But there were none. Besides he

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doubted whether he would dare to turn broadside to the wind and waves. The sun dropped below the cliffs and the shadows crept up the side of the gorge. Even the water had a dangerous oily look. Near either shore he caught glimpses of whirlpools and eddies.

Rod never knew exactly what took place after he rounded the bend and saw the island. He was busy trying to control his bouncing, swaying canoe. Soon he was soaked from flying spray and water began to slop about in the bottom.

Two hundred yards ahead the island split the center of the hurrying river. He saw at once that it was of some size, its tip strewn with boulders. Above them rose a high bank, topped with willows. Behind these he could see a stand of poplars and then at the further end of the island rose an ancient grove of huge cottonwood trees. Most of them were dead and their naked branches probed the sky. Even in the shadowy light of evening they showed bleached and white, long since stripped of their bark. They gave a weird effect, like skeletons reaching toward the sky, as though in a last plea they had asked to rise above the towering cliffs. Rod shivered. So this was Skeleton Island!

It was then that it happened. Too late Rod saw the row of jagged wolf-toothed boulders which lay just below the surface. He tried to turn away, but the wind caught him and the canoe seemed dragged toward the boulders by an unseen force. As he struggled with the paddle Rod remembered the old-timer's warning about this island and the treacherous currents.

Two men might have made it, but one was helpless. The canoe struck and there came the sickening rip of tearing canvas and splintered wood. Next instant Rod was thrown into the swift water. He saw Tess leap and strike the water at almost the same instant as himself. He swallowed a pint as the currents carried him deep. At once he struck upward, swimming with all his strength. Water tore at him, dragging him down, then sideways. Suddenly he was flung against the flat side of a boulder. Mentally he cursed his small axe, still strapped to his belt. Its weight didn't help. Rod's lungs were bursting and he'd almost given up hope when his head broke the surface. Gratefully he sucked in a great breath of fresh air. He couldn't remember a time when air had smelled so sweet.

Tess was swimming strongly a few yards away and she yapped at him joyfully. Rod looked around for the canoe. Fifty yards distant, plainly empty, it was drifting with the current. Far beyond it he could see his paddle, but everything else had sunk. The paddle was out of reach, but he thought that he could recover the canoe, so he struck out after it, swimming as fast as his wet binding clothes would allow him.

A short time later Rod pushed the canoe against the shore of the island, swam past it, and dragged it up a few feet. Then he fell on his face and panted. His unruly hair was tangled and it hung over his eyes. Tess shook herself energetically, then came and licked his face. After a time he sat up.

"Well, it's a lovely mess I've got us into!" he said, patting the little dog's head and still breathing hard.

Rod pulled the canoe up the bank. A jagged hole almost two feet long had been torn in the bottom. This was much worse than he had expected, but the worst part of all was that his patching material had gone to the bottom of the river along with his other duffel. Rod felt his wet, muddy trousers and knew at once that they were much too thin to hold out water. The nasty truth sank into his mind. He was marooned!

Rod didn't try to kid himself. He was in a tough spot. He was glad now that he had been wearing his belt axe, even if it had made it harder swimming. He took it off and laid it on the bank. Then he pulled his possessions from his pockets and lay them beside it. First came his precious map, wet and soggy but still readable. Then he found his wallet, a coil of fishing line, half-a-dozen small hooks stuck into a cork, a wad of waxed matches, a jackknife, handkerchief, letter, watch, a prospector's glass, and some silver. Rod looked at them ruefully. Tess sat on her haunches and gazed curiously.

"I'm glad to see that fish line and the hooks," said Rod. "We'll see if we can't catch some fish."

Rod put the things back into his pockets, all except the map. This he carried up the shore into the edge of the willows and spread it out, weighting it with rocks from

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the shore. It would have to dry. Carrying it in its present condition would mean ruin.

Dusk was rapidly closing in and Rod shivered. He'd have a look at the island before dark, he decided, and besides a walk might bring back his circulation. His hands were numb and even his feet were cold. He set off at a trot down the shore.

A hundred yards downstream he came to a beaver lodge. Beyond this point the high bank came right down to the water and further progress was blocked. Rod looked about for a way to get up through the willow onto the higher land of the island. Soon he found a beaver trail which had been cut some time before. He was about to go through when Tess growled, sniffing the ground as she did. Her ruff came up and then she seemed to bristle all over.

"What's the matter old girl?" Rod asked. "Don't you like beavers?"

His eyes had been scanning the path. Somehow it looked peculiar. He bent closer, looking at the tracks in the dust. Then he inspected the mud near the edge of the river. Rod whistled.

"If those aren't cougar tracks I never saw any!" he exclaimed.

He noticed something else. The great mass of poles and sticks which formed the lodge had been partly torn apart. Evidently the cougar had been hunting.

"How the devil could a cougar get to this place?" he pondered. "It's a good hundred and fifty miles from the Rockies!"

He went up the path and emerged into the open. To his right towered the huge cottonwoods. Before him and to his left were the poplars and a maze of fallen trees and saplings. A big rose bush, loaded with red fruit was close at hand. He picked some of the hips and munched them as he hurried the rest of the way around the island. Tess growled once or twice, as though catching an unpleasant scent on the air, but otherwise the walk was uneventful. Rod noted that both channels were swift and dangerous looking. Swimming to either shore would be out of the question. The current had taught him that. One encounter with a whirlpool was enough. Somehow he was going to have to patch the canoe.

By this time the first stars had come out and it was almost dark. He cut a path through the willow to the higher ground of the island. Here he found a small clearing which was sheltered but where he could safely build a fire. He gathered wood, stumbling about in the darkness and at last had a fair-sized heap.

Two hours later Rod was dozing beside the fire. A moon, just past full, had risen in the east and was casting its watery glow over the scene. Before lying down he had dragged up the canoe and propped it on its side to act as a reflector of the heat. Rod lay partly inside of it, warm, and completely sheltered. Tess was beside him sleeping peacefully. The wind had died, and only an occasional breeze came in from the river, rustling the leaves in the trees overhead.

He never knew exactly what woke him. Afterward he wondered if it might have been a snapping branch. All at once he was wide awake and aware of his surroundings. Perhaps it was some long dormant instinct inherited from his forefathers that caused him to lie still and open his eyes narrowly. What he saw made his scalp prickle.

Two eyes, widely spaced, were looking at him from beyond the fire. They glowed, motionless and unblinking, as they reflected the light of the flames. Rod continued to lie still. The fire died down and before long he could make out the shadowy form about fifty yards away. He needed no one to tell him that it was the cougar.

It gave him a peculiar feeling to realize that it was he who was being stalked. The background of wild cliffs against the starlit sky added their weird effect. It wasn't exactly fear that he felt, and yet it was fear of a new sort, something that came from deep inside, a sort of instinctive dread. He found himself becoming nervous, and yet his reason told him that he had little to fear. Cougars were cowardly creatures, he reminded himself, never attacking man except under peculiar circumstances. What bothered him most of all was the thought of the animal having crept up on him.

Then a new thought flashed through his brain and he felt by no means so comfortable. Could this cougar be starving? He remembered that he had seen no signs of life on the island, with the exception of the beaver lodge and the cougar's own tracks.

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Obviously the big cat had been spending a lot of time near the lodge, proof that it was searching for food. The conviction grew upon him every minute. This cougar was also marooned, and it was starving. In that case anything might be expected, even attack!

Rod decided to take no chances. Suddenly he rolled over, seized a chunk of firewood and flung it with a yell. The cougar vanished like a ghost, not making a sound. Tess set up a howl and when Rod took her over to the hot cougar tracks she became wildly excited. It was half an hour before she stopped yapping.

Rod wasn't entirely satisfied with their noisy act. He'd have been much better pleased if the animal had crashed away in terror. As it was, for all he knew the cat might still be prowling within a few yards.

He piled more wood on the fire and sat down. Tess refused to stay beside him. She kept moving back and forth by the fire, looking nervously about. After another half hour she set up a terrific howl, barking in the direction which lay behind the canoe. Rod looked over the side and soon made out the cougar's eyes, this time even closer than before. Again he flung a piece of firewood and now the cat did crash through some willows. Apparently his aim had been good. From then on Tess refused to be comforted. She alternately growled or yapped incessantly. Toward morning Rod caught a glimpse of the tawny-colored cougar on the opposite side of the fire. It glared at him malevolently.

HE WAS now certain that the animal was in an advanced stage of starvation and no longer doubted that it would attack as soon as it got a suitable opportunity. It was going to be either his life, or the big cat's. His mind went to work, and as the first light of dawn trickled into the raw-faced gorge, plan after plan was considered and cast aside. Another reason to reinforce his decision to kill the cat had occurred to him. With the cougar's hide he would be able to patch his canoe. He'd seen such a repair done by an Indian, using a deer hide. It was a crude job, but effective.

By dawn he had made his decision. His lack of tools restricted him to some sort of primitive trap and he had decided upon a deadfall. He knew that his plan had barely a fifty-fifty chance of success. It was risky, too, because he would be forced to use himself for bait. But Rod had no alternative.

When the light was strong he left the fire and began to move cautiously about. He didn't neglect to watch the trees, for there was always a chance that the big cat would lie in wait and spring upon him. But he considered it more probable that the cougar would retreat to the dead cottonwoods and await the coming of another night.

By the time the first rays of sunlight painted the highest pinnacles a golden yellow, Rod had scouted the entire upper end of the island. He found plenty of suitable trees and sapling for his purpose. Many had already been felled by the beavers and lay where they had fallen. He also satisfied himself that the cougar had temporarily abandoned the hunt.

He brought several pieces of sound deadwood back to the camp to make the delicate trip sticks for the deadfall. These were important for it depended upon them to hold up a lot of the weight and also to let it fall at exactly the right moment. Out of these he cut the well-known "figure 4" deadfall support. Two hours after he began work he laid them carefully aside.

By this time the pangs of hunger were making themselves felt. Rose hips weren't very filling. He hated to stop work even for a few minutes, because it was going to keep him very busy to finish his trap before night. But Rod knew that he must keep up his strength or fail from the lack of it. He pulled the fish line from his pocket.

At the mouth of the beaver trail above the lodge he picked a few rose hips, scanning the huge cottonwoods carefully as he did it. But he could see no sign of the cougar. As he went through the trail to the lodge Tess again began to growl and fuss about. She hated the cougar scent.

Below the lodge there was a backwater and it contained minnows. Rod scooped a hole in the sand where there was about six inches of water. Then he rubbed a rose hip into meal and lowered his hand into the hole, palm up, and waited. Tiny frag-

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ments of the meal floated away and soon a school of minnows came up the trail of food. They were cautious at first but soon became bold. Within five minutes Rod scooped three onto the sandy shore. The delicate silver of their bodies looked almost transparent against the darker sand.

He was about to pick them up when Tess suddenly barked savagely and darted toward the trail. Rod drew his axe from his belt and waited, trying to distinguish any sounds above the terrier's frantic yapping. Then he pushed past her and walked up the trail. Near the mouth he stopped. There were fresh cougar tracks on top of his own!

Rod was no fool and he knew that it would be foolish to risk a fight with the small axe as his only weapon. It would be too one-sided. So he withdrew, picked up the minnows, and walked up the shore. Tess followed reluctantly, growling all the while. Not far from camp he set out two lines. Then he got his map, which was now dry, and put it in his pocket as he returned to the clearing.

His next task was to cut down a large tree to use as a deadfall. He chose one at the edge of the open space. It was an hour before it crashed to the ground. As he trimmed it he reflected that a belt axe was not meant for felling a tree fifteen inches through.

Hopefully Rod went and looked at his lines. They were barren and even the minnows were gone, washed off in the strong current. The other side of the island might be better, Rod decided. There was nothing else for it, he had to go and catch more bait.

This time the minnows were thick in the backwater, attracted by the recent meal from the berry. Rod was soon absorbed in decoying them into his hand where he had placed more berry pulp. The water was full of them, darting, coasting in schools, or simply lying still and gently fanning the water.

ALL at once there was a commotion close to the shadow of the lodge. A great fish darted up and plunged among the thickest of the minnows. His great mouth was open and three times he snapped at the terrified little fish. Many broke water in their haste to escape, skittering over the water like tiny silver arrows. The great northern pike had threshed the water to foam. Now he stopped moving and sank slowly back to the depths like a greenish log. Far below his fins flipped and he glided back into his hiding place.

Rod stared after it. He was thinking of how many meals that great speckled monster would make, and his mouth watered at the thought. He'd had no substantial food for almost a day and he was beginning to feel the effects. It would be no trick at all to drop a minnow down to the waiting fish, but would the monster be fooled? And what about landing him after he had been hooked? A northern pike of his size, probably a good twelve pounds, would be like trying to hold a mustang. With only fifty feet of line, and without rod or reel, it would be quite a struggle.

Engrossed in his thoughts, and in the sight of the huge fish, Rod had been paying little attention to Tess and her snarling. Now she howled in terror. Rod spun about.

The cougar had stopped at the mouth of the trail, eyes narrowed, fangs exposed, and tail lashing. Rod's eyes had scarcely focused when it leaped. He had no time to jump aside or even reach his axe which lay at his feet. The big cat was aiming at his throat and he threw up his arms in an effort to protect himself. At the same instant he deliberately threw himself backward into the water. In mid-air the gaunt yellowish brown body of the cougar struck him. But the cat's aim had been spoiled because the man's body was falling. Its teeth snapped shut on the flesh of his left arm and its claws raked past his chest, missing him by a fraction of an inch and ripping the shirt half off him. A fraction of a second later Rod struck the water. Instantly the cat let go. Rod allowed himself to sink into the calm water below the lodge, then kicked away from shore and rose fifteen feet from the bank. There was a gash in his arm but otherwise he was not hurt.

Tess was a few yards down the bank, barking as though she had gone mad. The cat stood on the lodge, its back to Rod as it faced the little dog. Plainly it was afraid of Tess. Again and again it snarled and spat with long brown tail twitching. Then

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the cougar saw Rod's head and a growl rumbled from its throat. Tess rushed nearer and the cat again turned to face her.

Rod had no fear that the beast would take to the water to attack him. But it seemed to have no intention to leave the lodge. It sat down, watching first him and then the little dog, eyes baleful and hungry.

Rod was puzzled. Why should the cougar attack him here and leave him strictly alone at the clearing? The reason hit him like a bomb. This was where the cat had secured its only food! It was trying to protect what it considered to be its own!

ROD swam downstream, but he kept out of the current. He had come to respect this treacherous river. A hundred yards away he waded ashore, found a stout beaver-cut pole and returned to the water. He saw that Tess was still worrying the cougar. Rod worked his way toward the lodge, keeping close to the shore. Fifty yards away he again began to swim, pushing the six-foot pole ahead of him. At the end of the lodge he stopped. The cat backed away from him, snarling.

At this instant, encouraged by the appearance of her master, Tess attacked the cougar from the rear, nipping at its tail. The cat spun to face her, then gave chase. Tess, much too nimble to be caught, scuttled into the willows, snarling over her shoulder. Then she yapped and growled at the big cat which stood helplessly at the fringe.

Meanwhile Rod climbed onto the lodge and stood up, his club held ready. He smiled a little to himself. This was turning back the clock! Here was a man with a club, facing a savage beast. Here even was the dog aiding him!

Swinging his weapon he advanced. The cat backed toward the trail, spat several times, snarled, then spun about and fled. As he had suspected, unless the cougar could catch him unawares it did not care for open combat in daylight.

Rod picked up his axe and five minutes later he was back at his camp. He realized that it would only be asking for trouble to stay around the lodge under the circumstances.

Once more he set to work on the trap. To test it he set up the deadfall and adjusted the trip sticks. Next he cut a long green willow with a branch forking near the base. He cut this branch short and used it to hook over the trigger stick of the trap. He jerked, and the log fell heavily. This much at least of the trap was ready.

Now he had to build an enclosure and this was going to be by far the biggest job. At first he carried only beaver-cut poles, dozens of them, and piled them in the clearing. Then he cut several dozen more. He sharpened them all and proceeded to plant them upright side by side. His plan was to make an enclosure about twenty feet long and about half the width. The only opening would be under the deadfall. He would lie in the far end and wait, trip stick in hand. Then, if the cougar attempted to enter, he would pull the trip and pin the animal under the big log.

By mid-afternoon Rod was only half done and he realized that his speed was slackening no matter how fiercely he drove himself. The combination of hard work and no food was beginning to tell. He couldn't forget the big pike. In his mind he cast about for ways to hold off the cougar while he attempted to catch the fish. At last he determined to try building a fire near the mouth of the beaver trail, gambling that the big cat would be frightened off.

He gathered a great armful of dead limbs and walked down the shore to the lodge. Hurriedly he lit some bark and got a small fire going. When it blazed up he slashed some of the closest willows so that they would not catch fire and pushed the burning wood to the very mouth of the trail.

It took him almost ten minutes to catch minnows, for now they were wary. Then he piled on more wood, baited his hook, and cast toward the tip of the beaver lodge. The minnows sank slowly to the depths. Then Rod drew it through the water, twitching it closer to the great northern's hiding place. Suddenly he caused the minnow to dart away. The ruse worked! Out from under the lodge came the pike. Its mouth opened and the minnow disappeared.

Rod gave the fish a moment to get the hook well down its gullet, then jerked the line. The water frothed and the line burned his fingers as it went out. Within a second or two the fish was far out in the river.

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Rod looked with dismay at the coil of line rapidly disappearing at his feet.

It was at this moment that the cougar chose to reappear. Tess sent up an excited howl and Rod looked up to see the big cat at the edge of the willows a few yards downstream. Snarling it began to advance toward them along the high bank. The thick willows made its progress slow.

Tess bounded about. Her eyes were almost squinted shut from curling her lips to show her sharp little fangs. But she had little effect on the cougar. Rod realized that he and the dog would have to leave the vicinity of the lodge or else bluff it out once more. To do either would mean the loss of the pike. He decided to try to work the fish upstream. At the same instant the fish decided to turn downstream. The line sang, then snapped about ten feet from his hand!

Rod felt sick in the pit of his stomach as he realized that his last chance for food was gone. If the cougar had stayed away for a few minutes longer he might have won.

Turning quickly he drew his axe from his belt and began to back away up the shore toward his camp. On the way he shoved the remaining line into his pocket.

"Come on Tess!" he called, "we'll try and settle with that devil tonight!" The terrier made a final rush and then obeyed. She came in little rushes, keeping up an endless hubbub. Her excited barks echoed and re-echoed from the surrounding cliffs until the sunlit gorge fairly rang with sound. The cougar didn't follow.

No matter how hungry he was, Rod didn't intend to face the night without giving his deadfall trap a tryout. He drove his weary muscles relentlessly. It was late evening, almost dusk, when he finished. It was a crude looking thing, and now that it was completed Rod felt doubtful of its value.

As he set the trap, lifting the heavy log and placing the trip sticks, Tess began to growl. Rod knew that the cat must be close. It occurred to him that it would be a shame if the cougar killed him now, after all the work.

ROD dragged the canoe to the edge of the bushes, a good distance from the enclosure. He wished to leave the cat nothing to stand upon in case it attempted to leap over the top of the crude fence. As he went back past the deadfall log it occurred to him that there was nothing to stop the cat walking up it and springing from there. To discourage this he gathered brush from the fringe of the clearing and piled it on the tree, from one end to the other.

He checked to make certain that the willow stick was securely hooked to the trigger of the trap. Then he crawled gingerly under the log and into the back of the enclosure, closely followed by Tess. Rod lay down near the trip stick. Beside him he placed a heavy sapling which he could use as a club. Tess snuggled close. Now and then she growled.

Tonight there was no fire to make the cougar cautious, and after the creature had become accustomed to the trap Rod had no doubt that it would become bold. He was tired, so tired that before long he was nodding. The terrier's frightened growl was what woke him. Even he could smell the stench of the cougar. Tess was looking at the wall behind him. Rod rolled over so that he was facing in that direction. The cougar circled. He could tell the big cat's location by the terrier's actions. He rolled back.

Rod's neck began to ache and the arm beneath him went to sleep. He became chilled with no fire to keep him warm. In the east the moon rose and Rod knew that several hours had passed. Still there was no sign of the cat.

The whole clearing was bathed in moonlight before he saw the cougar. The animal was creeping toward the opening, its body low. Rod felt his scalp prickle and a series of strange little shivers ran down his spine.

At first Tess watched the cat in silence, her head thrust forward watchfully. Then she began to shake with excitement. Finally growls began to rumble in her throat. She seemed to know that Rod didn't wish her to bark.

The cat stopped, and Rod's hand tightened on the trip stick. If the creature rushed he intended to time the log to fall on it, but he knew that his chances weren't one in twenty. A flock of ducks winnowed overhead and the whistle of their wings

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faded into the distance. Somewhere far away a coyote howled. Rod watched the shadows move slowly across the clearing.

Then the cat began to creep closer. Rod noted a chip just inside the enclosure. It shone white in the moonlight. When the cat reached that chip he would pull the trip.

TESS became more and more excited and he had to hold her with one hand. She seemed not only excited, but cold as well. Rod felt himself shivering with her. He thought that the cougar would never move under the deadfall. He saw the creature rise a little and begin to twitch its tail. It took a step. The chip disappeared. Tess suddenly barked, and at the same instant Rod jerked the trip!

There was a blur of movement as the log fell. The cat yowled and in a daze of excitement Rod realized that the animal was under the log. The question was whether it would stay there. Tess leaped forward, yapping in a frenzy. Rod scrambled to his feet, grabbed the club, and almost fell.

As he raised it to strike he realized that the cat was pulling its body from under the log! How he hit the big cat he never knew, but he hit it, and hard. The cougar sank down, blood pouring from its nose. Again and again Rod struck, beating the animal until it ceased to move.

Tess seized one of the cat's paws and chewed madly, howling all the while. At last Rod stopped and leaned upon his club. Realization flooded over him. The cougar was dead! He'd be able to patch his canoe and get out to civilization with his precious map!

It was two hours later when he went down to the beaver lodge. It looked the same as usual in the moonlight, but much more friendly. As usual, Tess growled, but Rod was no longer worried about cougars. His mind was on the big pike. Over his shoulder he carried a long willow pole, just like the ones he had used when a boy. With such an outfit he had once landed a monster pike, and he wondered if he could do it again. Ten feet of line wasn't much, but it would have to do.

The minnow dropped into the water with scarcely a splash and was retrieved. Over and over he cast, covering every inch of the hole. He had almost decided to give up when there was a solid jar, as though the hook had snagged the bottom. Rod heaved on the pole and it bent almost double. He was giving the huge pike no time to realize what had happened. The pole cracked but it didn't break, and the line held. By its own momentum the great pike slid halfway out of the water, then, for the first time aware of its danger, began to struggle furiously.

Rod dived upon it, careless of the fact that he was kneeling in water. His hands closed behind the pike's gills and held. Ten seconds later he had it high on the bank.

Tess insisted upon helping but she only got in the way. Strangely Rod didn't seem to mind. She was one partner who believed in him, and between them they'd see it through—shipwreck, cougar, starvation and flood.

WEEKS later when Rod was interviewing the Museum people about going back to supervise excavation work at the fossil beds, he didn't say much about how nearly he hadn't made it. But he did mention the fact that Tess must go along.

"Nothing like a girl's having faith in him to make a man a success," he said.

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China Clipper

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

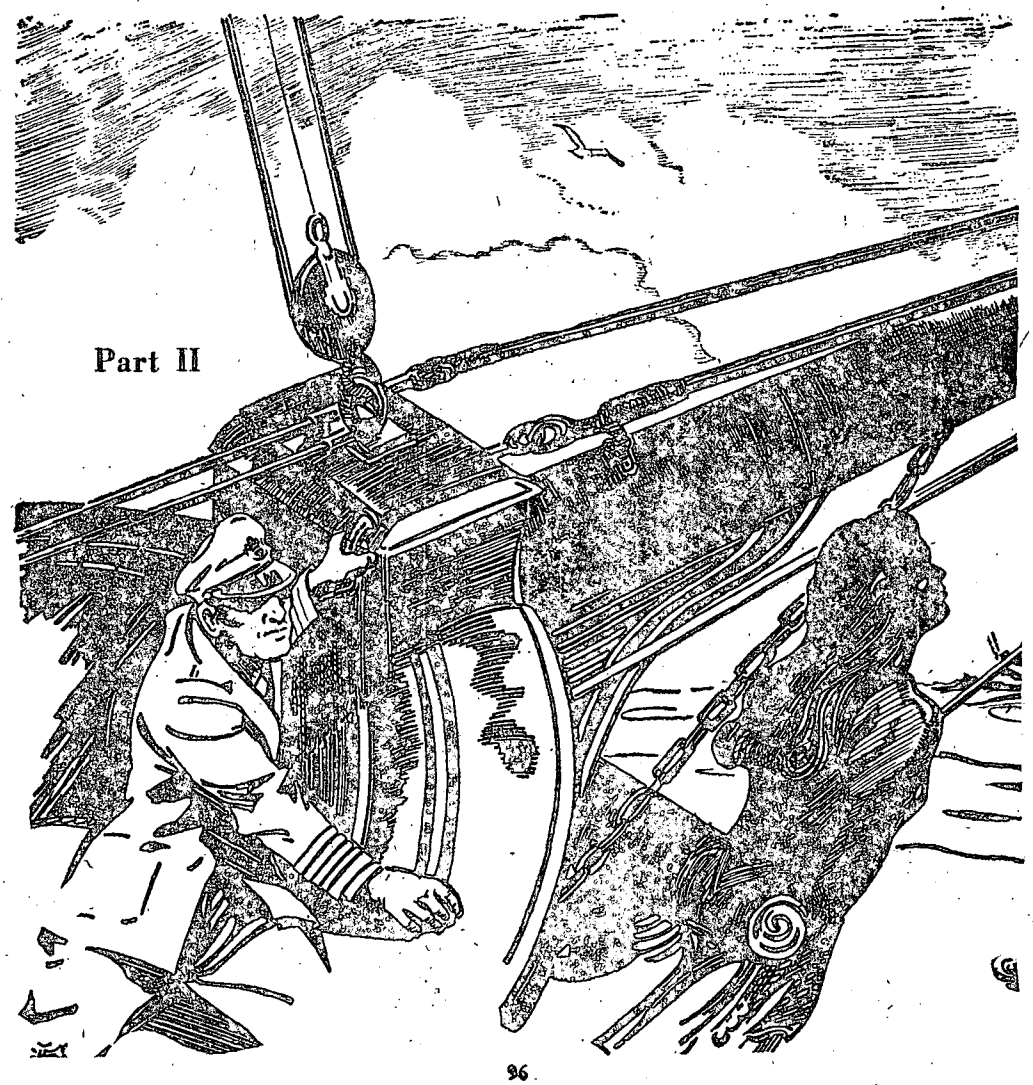
THE STORY SO FAR

IN THE early days of the Clipper Ship era, dollar chasing owners like Hermon Hale of Hale & Sutton favored seafarers who pushed their ships and crews to the limit on China trade routes. A hard-sailing advocate of the "speed-is-money" slogan was Joab Erskine who competes with his young first officer, Dennis Garner, for the affections of Hale's prettiest daughter, Syria.

Garner's advancement has been held back by his unwillingness to risk ship and crew for speed records. When Erskine is given command of the new clipper ship *"China Queen"* Garner, tired of being a permanent first officer, seeks a command of his own. But Denny is shanghaied, finds himself aboard the *"Queen"*—and is told he can sign up as first officer—or be put in irons! Also aboard are Hermon Hale and Syria.

Off the Borneo Coast they pick up the

Part II



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She Was a Proud Craft, a Ship-Lover's Dream Come True; Made For Boundless Speed and Adventure

crew of a wrecked brig, take aboard its cargo of three hundred opium chests, and its captain, unscrupulous hard-bitten Amos Butler. Despite the Chinese opium embargo Erskine and Butler with Hale's tacit agreement decide to smuggle in the valuable opium.

Young Garner has his doubts. A believer in astrology, the ship's horoscope tells him that the clipper is riding to her finish in Chinese waters. His objections to the *China Queen* becoming involved in the opium business are overruled, though, and Garner realizes he has only lost face in the eyes of Hale and Syria.

Later, some double dealing with Chinese smugglers attempting to trade silver for the opium casks and being bludgeoned out of both by the treachery of Erskine and Butler causes Denny to turn on his skipper.

"You can't even deal square with fellow pirates," he accuses.

The two men fight and the Captain finally drops Garner with a lucky punch.

"Throw this man in irons," Erskine orders harshly, "And log him for mutiny!"

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VIII

IN ADDITION to port and starboard forecastle, sail locker, carpenter shop, and galley, the forward deck house included a room for boatswain and carpenter, and one for apprentices. This last, being unoccupied, became Garner's prison, and but for the twelve-pound shot secured to a chain which was fixed to the shackle riveted about his ankle, he was comfortable enough.

For the first few days after the *China Queen's* hauling southward, Garner had plenty of time to ponder, since he saw no one but the seaman who brought him his meals.

The fellow was embarrassed, and avoided the prisoner's glance.

"Jenkins," Garner told himself, "can't help getting a thrill out of seeing a first officer in irons. It convinces him there's still justice in the world. Since I can go down, he can go up, which makes him happy because the poor devil is too stupid ever to be more than an A.B."

But it was also clear that Jenkins was sorry. Garner had by just one punch fallen short of laying the skipper out cold. So, while it was good to see one of the mighty men aft put in irons, Jenkins would rather it had been some other officer.

Garner, who had sailed before the mast, understood all this, whereas Erskine, having been "blown in through the cabin window," might not quite understand. Therein lay a thin hope.

"Jenkins," he began, the morning of the third day, "what am I logged for?"

"I don't read the log!" Pause. "Sir."

"They don't have 'sirs' in irons. I've picked as much harness out of my loubscouse as you have."

Jenkins fidgeted. "Well, Sir, you're logged for mutiny. Not that I read it myself, but—"

"Any really good news?"

Jenkins grinned at that ponderous humor. If he were a first officer in irons, he'd be just as witty and nonchalant.

"Mr. Butler's first officer now, and he's got your cabin, sir. Mr. Hale looks happy, and the young lady, she doesn't. We're making Macao Roads by dusk, Sir."

"And about the time we're piloted up the river to Whampu, I'll be hustled off to the consular court for mutiny?"

"Maybe I can get the steward to pick up your astrology book from Mr. Butler's cabin, Sir."

That Jenkins wasn't mocking him was plain from the wind-burned, loutish face. Garner dipped two Spanish dollars from his pocket. Jenkins' eyes began to gleam, even though he shook his head and gestured, and said, "Be glad to try, I've been in jail, myself, many's the time, Sir. I can't take your money, Sir."

But he took it anyway.

"You believe in astrology, Jenkins?"

"I wouldn't say that I do, and I can't say I don't, Sir."

"That's the way I feel about it. I don't really need the stars to tell me what I'll get at a consular court."

"The crew'll stand by you, Sir."

This was no more than a kind thought, for not one seaman would dare say a word in Garner's favor. Short of violent insanity, there was absolutely no legal justification for laying hands on the skipper.

"Astrology," he said to Jenkins, "won't help a man swim with a twelve-pound shot on his ankle."

The seaman started to answer, but said nothing. He looked thoughtful and worried when he left. Garner merely looked thoughtful.

Back in the States, Garner's story, whether or not it got official credence, would create sentiment in his favor, for while no one would be indignant about opium smuggling, the seizure of the silver would be condemned. Erskine had therefore to settle the matter in China, if only to protect himself and spare the owner embarrassment. Escape before he was taken ashore was therefore Garner's first necessity.

Through the deadlight of the apprentice quarters, he sighted the coast. Barren, rocky islets jutted from the China Sea. The heights of Hong Kong rose against a distant background of cultivated slopes. And then he recognized the three thousand foot peak of Lantao Island's southern shore. She wasn't making for Hong Kong Harbor or she'd've stood up the Lamma Channel. . . .

Jenkins had been right. She was haul-

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ing for Macao, the Portuguese trading city on the opposite side of the Pearl River mouth, forty miles west.

Thirty-five miles upstream, the river narrowed to a channel two miles wide, and called Boca Tigris, the "Tiger's Mouth." This was the half-way point to Whampu, where the clippers docked, and their cargoes were lightered to the factories in Canton, somewhat upstream and on the opposite bank of the river.

WHEN the *China Queen* dropped anchor in Macao Roads, off Praya Grande, she had cut a day from the fastest run made by the old *Falcon,* herself a record breaking ship; and this despite the detour to Foochow, and laying-to to pick up opium, to tranship it, to apply and then to remove her disguise. But as he pondered on that splendid performance, and knew that even without Erskine's uncanny skill, the *China Queen* would still have surpassed any other ship afloat, he realized that the performance in which he had taken such pride, day after day, made his own plight even more desperate.

Nobody would believe that she could have dallied so long en route, and still have made such a fast passage. Finally, Hermon Hale's pride in the record breaking run would justify Erskine, regardless of what he did.

The roads swarmed with *tanka* boats, and fishing boats. Beyond the long reach of stone breakwater, the coast was solid with Chinese craft of every kind. Those which Garner could not see from his window, he could smell. And ashore, the tiled roofs of old Macao reddened the slopes of the two hills which commanded the peninsula. To the northwest was the Chinese quarter, not far from the barrier which marked the limit of Portuguese concession.

Jenkins came in with beans and coffee. After a furtive glance about, he dug into his jumper and brought out *Lilly's Astrology.* "Got it, Sir," he whispered. "I'm going ashore, if I don't see you again, good luck."

He was gone before Garner could answer.

Between the pages of the book was a fine, flat file. Garner thrust it into the ticking which contained his "donkey's breakfast," and resolutely set himself to eating. He had to eat, and as much as he could.

Boatmen had brought oranges and plantains alongside, kumquats and sugar cane and persimmons. Other peddlers offered ducks, chickens, fish, eggs. And all babbled, yelled, shrieked shrilly in pidgin-English. An old story to Garner; for the first time, he found it fascinating, and he envied those who could go to the bulwark and bargain.

The noises on deck and alongside covered the soft sound of the file as he worked on the head of the rivet which secured his shackle.

Darkness fell, and the voices in the forecastle subsided. Ashore, firecrackers popped, fiddles wailed, gongs whanged. A Chinese festival was going full blast. A fertilizer boat hove to windward. The stench billowed through the deadlight.

The file seemed better suited to raise blisters on Garner's cramped fingers than to remove the head of the rivet. At first, every vibration of the deck, every outside voice twisted by the wind became an alarm, and he thrust the file into the slit in the straw-stuffed mattress; but gradually, Garner controlled his jumpy nerves.

And then, as the job neared its end, he became too intent. Without warning the door opened. Surprise numbed Garner during an instant which stretched interminably. He didn't know whether to hold the file as a weapon, or hide it under cover of gloom. He was telling himself, all at once, that Jenkins had returned to give further help, and that Erskine had become suspicious and had sent someone to check up.

THE dark figure was scarcely distinguishable against the shadow in the doorway. Garner shifted his weight. He wouldn't get a second chance. He had to make the most of this very slim one. The chain made a faint jangling sound.

"Denny," the visitor whispered, and stepped in. Then, as the latch clicked, and he knew that it was Syria, the voice went on, "I didn't know what to do or think! Nobody'll tell me anything—what did happen—what went wrong?"

Reaching ahead into the gloom, she found him as he got up. "How'd you slip in?" he whispered, as he caught her in his arms. "I didn't hear a sound."

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"I got hold of a key, finally. It took the longest time sneaking forward. What did happen—Dad won't tell me—except you and Joab had trouble—there's been talk of mutiny."

"You mean, on my account?"

"No, that you started a mutiny. You didn't, you couldn't have, I won't believe it, what are they going to do with you?"

"That's what I ask you! You mean you don't know, haven't heard?"

"Good heavens, no! Nothing! We were under way before Joab let us out of our staterooms. He said there'd been trouble, and a revenue junk hauling right for us, he'd been too busy to think of us until he'd made sail. And I did hear a shot fired."

"So did I."

"I didn't miss you till next day. Dad must have known sooner. He acted the oddest, pretending there'd been nothing unusual. Joab simply said Mr. Butler had taken your place and as much as told me to mind my own business. Very politely, of course. Purely a personal difference between you two. But Joab's not fooling me, he's not himself."

"There's nothing you can do about it."

"But there is, there must be, and I will!"

Her fingers sank into his arms. "Tell me, I can."

"Telling you won't help. It'll be settled in court."

"You mean, you'll be in irons till you get back to the States?"

"My idea is, it'll be settled in Canton. So there won't be any word of it back home."

"Oh." Pause. "What do you mean?"

"What's the usual penalty for mutiny?"

"Good God! They can't do *that!* I won't stand for it! I'll—I'll—"

"Darling, there's nothing you can do. You were in your stateroom, you didn't see, you didn't hear. The same goes for your father."

"But I'll get him to do something!" she declared, fiercely. "That old fool, I'll hound him till he listens to me!"

"Not a chance. And I'll tell you why not—"

He told her how the smugglers had been tricked and robbed, and he concluded, "That's piracy, regardless of the fact that those we looted were Chinese lawbreakers. And your father has to stick with Erskine, to protect himself."

"But dad wasn't responsible. Joab told him, remember, back off the Borneo Coast, that the owner hadn't a thing to say, once the ship was under way."

"Your father's competitors," Garner explained, "could make enough out of it to put him out of business, and they'd like nothing better—he's cut their throats time and again, and they'd love the chance to get back. Anyway, he'd stick with a record breaker like Erskine, and to the last."

"I don't believe—"

She started violently, and cried out when a key clashed metallically, and the door jerked open. A bullseye lantern's beam reached into the cabin. The walls reflected the light, so that Garner recognized Amos Butler's hatchet face, and two seamen of the port watch.

"Here, here, what's this?" the first officer demanded.

"Get out!" Syria cried. "You snooping, sneaking—"

"Pardon me, but you are out of order, passengers belong aft. I missed a key, and—" With that, he turned to Garner. "Filing your way free, are you? Well, well, it is lucky I followed this young lady. And took time to get some witnesses."

"You'd better go, Syria," Garner said, quietly. "I'll have to give Mr. Butler the file, and wait for another chance."

AS HE spoke, he thrust her ahead of him. He hoped that she'd recognize the reassurance he tried to give her by tightening and relaxing, and again tightening his grip on her shoulders before letting her go.

She made for the door, and without looking back. Butler stood somewhat aside. Garner smiled sourly into the lantern light, made an ironic little bow, and stooped to pick up the file. Instead, he snatched the twelve-pound shot, and straight-armed it.

Butler, caught off guard, made a belated move for his revolver. The ball caught him in the pit of the stomach, doubling him up. The chain went taut, nearly yanking Garner from his feet. As it was, he lurched forward and went to the deck with his successor. The lantern hit the deck.

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Its beam reached athwart ship, leaving the two seamen in darkness, and at loss as to which of the two to kick senseless.

Things had moved too fast for yells or alarm.

Garner snatched Butler's revolver. He pocketed the file, and picked up the twelve-pound shot. "Don't move, or I'll blow your guts out," he told them.

The light reflected from behind them made them good targets.

Then Erskine shouted from the poop, "What's going on there?"

Garner, carrying his ball and chain, headed for the platform from which the lead was heaved. Erskine jumped from the poop and ran forward. Garner thrust the Colt into his waistband, and pried at his shackle with the tang of the file. He slashed his ankle. The rivet, however, had been cut down almost flush, so the shackle unhinged. The two seamen were yelling. Erskine commanded, "Stop him!" and blazed away with his pistol.

Garner cleared the platform. His ball and chain went with him. Automatically, a seaman yelled, "Man overboard!"

"Shut up, you fool!" Erskine roared. "He's not overboard. He went forward!"

IX

AT SUNRISE, Garner crawled from under the hulk of a boat beached for repairs, and looked about him. Fishermen were shoving off with their nets. Gardeners and farmers from the Chinese end of the island sculled *sampans* toward the Portuguese city. The house-boat colony, strung along the shore, was coming to life. Far out in Macao Roads, he recognized the black hull, the towering masts and squared yards of the *China Queen*. For the first time, he became aware of her beauty, and her splendid lines.

Garner raised his hand in a gesture of greeting; more than greeting, it was homage to beauty, to a ship-lover's dream that had after five thousand weary years come true. "And good-bye," he said aloud, and sadly.

For a moment he imagined that he could distinguish the features of the figurehead, the life-sized image of Kwan Yin, though at such distance, that was impossible. He had however so often looked at the subtly smiling Queen of Heaven, carved in teak or in jade, in the shops of Canton, that the lovely face took shape in his mind, as though his eyes had been able to reach so far across the water.

He would then have turned his back, lest from fancying he saw the features of Kwan Yin, he would try next to get a glimpse of Syria Hale, but he kept looking seaward, for riding at anchor were three British men-o-war. The contrast between their dumpy shapes and the *China Queen's* lovely lines made his glance shift back to the clipper.

"Good-bye to both of you," he said, and hoped that Syria would guess that he'd got the shackle from his ankle before he dropped into the treacherous current.

Then, "I'm so hungry I could eat harness without the horse."

Erskine's word came back: "You fool, he's not overboard, he went that way."

The skipper, Garner told himself, had wanted to give the ball and chain every chance to make a job of it. While Amos Butler had seen the file, the fact that neither chain nor shot were aboard should convince them that in panic, he'd gone over the side, and to the bottom.

He crossed the broad drive which skirted the peninsula, and went into the crowded shopping district, where Chinese, Parsis, Arabs, and Manila men had already taken down the shutters of their cubby-hole shops.

Itinerant blacksmiths unslung tiny forges, and the wooden anvils with iron faces. Barbers squatted and laid out their quaint kits.

First Garner made a deal with a tailor, swapping his sea-drenched clothes for a fresh suit and a hat. From a peddler he got smoking hot sausages, a bowl of rice, and one of tea. He could not quite bring himself to risk a Chinese shave. Better grow a beard.

The Union Jack tempted him. Once enlisted as a seaman in Her Majesty's Service, he'd be safe enough. Garner, however, wanted more than safety, more than escape. He had to vindicate himself, which couldn't be done by running from his own people.

"Fan kwei! Fan kwei!" the Chinese

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loafers and beggars jeered as he went by. "Foreign devil! Foreign devil!"

Portuguese soldiers and police patrolled the narrow, crooked streets. Seamen of all nations prowled about in search of food, liquor, gambling dives. Portuguese dignitaries drove about in gleaming carriages. Others rode in palanquins or sedan chairs carried by porters.

Garner, standing in the doorway of a warehouse, saw a familiar face, and turned just in time to avoid the *China Queen's* carpenter and the boatswain. Clearly, the town was too small for him.

As far as he could figure, the *China Queen* had anchored off Macao because of her opium cargo. Normally, she would have gone up the river. Without any doubt, Erskine and Butler were making arrangements to bribe the mandarins whose duty it was to suppress the traffic. Yet the logical spots for such deals were Kum Sing Mun Harbor, thirty miles upstream, or Lintin Island, or Junk Fleet Entrance, at Wang Mun.

Amos Butler, though he knew the ropes, preferred not to follow the customary way of disposing of contraband. Butler's men, picked up by the *China Queen,* had insisted on shoving off for Singapore in a longboat instead of staying aboard to haul for Canton. That, and Butler's trickery off Foochow, suggested Garner's next move.

Somewhere in the corrupt maze of the opium traffic there must be enemies powerful enough to make Butler wary. Apparently, the hatchet-faced skipper, no longer able to trade in his own right, was using the *China Queen,* Erskine's recklessness, and Hale's greed as a means of hitting back and then retiring with profit.

Garner's move was then to get to Canton to see Endurance Potter before the *China Queen* went upstream to discharge legitimate cargo and pick up a load of tea. Potter, for years Hale & Sutton's factor, would have all the answers, and by telling Butler's Chinese enemies where they could find him, Garner would not only be striking at the trouble-maker, but also, at Joab Erskine.

Garner grimaced and spat. But thinking of how he had been logged for mutiny solidified his resolution, for if the skipper were thoroughly discredited, the justice of his entry in the log would likewise be open to question.

THE world began to look brighter. He had an aim, and once he'd scuttled the two crooks, he could ship back to the States to demand a showdown. Once stripped of his armor of infallibility, Joab Erskine couldn't silence the seamen who had witnessed the trickery off Foochow.

Garner paused in an alley to examine the revolver he had taken from Butler. During the swim ashore, the powder must have been soaked, no matter how snugly the bullets had been rammed into the cylinder. Before he risked the trip upstream, he had to pull the charges and reload.

After an hour, he found a Portuguese gunsmith, to whom he explained his problem. The man had powder, yes; percussion caps, no, nothing as new-fangled as all that. Now, something sensible like a flint lock pistol . . . here is a pair of them . . . excellent pistols . . . these caps, they are ruined.

Garner spun the cylinder of the unloaded weapon, cocked and snapped it. There was a pop. "Ah . . . that one is good. Now try the others, then if they are all good—"

The man was quite serious. After all, the same flint was good for many shots. . . . Garner, however, begged off, measured fresh powder into the chambers, and tamped home the bullets. Of the five remaining percussion caps, at least two or three would fire.

He was again heading for the waterfront when he saw the two red and gilt sedan chairs which knotty-legged coolies had set down for a breathing spell. Hermon Hale, in the first, was shouting, "You lazy devils, four of you, and resting more than working! Get going, you!"

Garner turned to a money changer's booth.

He had already got a glimpse of Syria, in the chair following Hale's. She called, "Dad, will you shut up! You couldn't walk up this hill, much less carry anything up it!"

"We're late now! I tell you—"

Garner laid out a gold piece and tried to keep from being short changed. Loafers gathered to gape, to jeer, and to curse the two foreigners. Garner next laid out silver,

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to buy a string of "cash." Finally the coolies picked up their burdens. By that time, Garner had heard enough to learn that the Hales had found lodgings in Macao. Apparently, the *China Queen* wouldn't be going up the river for some time.

Despite the risk of running into shipmates, he resolved to trail Syria. "By now she'll know what Erskine and Butler are planning," he reasoned. The truth, however, was that he wanted to tell her that however long it might take him, he'd be back to fight things to a finish in the States. He had to let her know. Regardless of what happened, he could not pass up this chance to keep her from giving him up as lost, or as a fugitive who could never return. If Syria didn't wait, nothing else counted enough to be worth the effort.

Then, before he had gone more than half a block, he saw a sedan chair and four coolies.

He hailed them, and got in. And after making them understand that they were to follow, but not to overtake Syria, he pulled the curtains.

His delay in getting to Canton was time well lost. Whether coincidence or the stars, this chance meeting strengthened his hunch. He had touched bottom, and now he was on his way up. However far above him "up" might prove to be, Dennis Garner at least had quit sinking.

X

HERMON HALE'S sedan coolies filed through the iron gates of the stone wall which enclosed a two-story house of gray masonry. It was well up the slope, almost on a level with the fortress which, from the height of the southernmost of Macao Peninsula's two hills, commanded the inner harbor. Garner, noting the dignity of the house, passed on in his chair. Then, finally afoot, he strolled northward, away from the probable haunts of seamen. He'd heard of the grotto where Camoens, the exiled poet, had spent so many of the days of his declining years.

Garner smiled sourly. "He wrote a poem, and they called that mutiny . . . the poor devil didn't have the satisfaction of giving some high ranking swab a crisp clip to the chin." He looked at his battered fists. "Mine aren't handy for poems."

Chinese passersby stared, and cursed him, but made no trouble. The dark-haired and dark-eyed Portuguese were lucky, since for all their being considered barbarians, they at least weren't counted as devils, or evil spirits in semi-human form. He considered hunting an apothecary, to get logwood to stain his face, but decided against risking a return to the shopping district.

That night, Garner returned to the pretentious house. He had learned that it belonged to *Senhor* Dom Joao Texeira, a member of the Senate which, though solemnly going through the motions of governing Macao, was actually under the thumb of a mandarin who supervised Portuguese activities. In addition to information, Garner had two lengths of cord, and other accessories for outwitting a wall whose crown was armed with steel spikes.

He scaled the barrier, and after letting the cord down on the inside, he descended to the garden. In the rear were servants' quarters, and stables. He worked his way among magnolia, japonica, jasmine and orange trees.

Bars guarded the windows of the main floor. The lights of the salon were dimmed by drawn drapes. He heard subdued voices, and the tinkle of glassware as he crept toward the porter's kiosk, beside the main gate. There was a man on duty. Garner continued his prowl, sizing up the larger trees whose branches might offer ready escape. About his waist was a length of cord which, if he had time to use it, would break the drop.

Second floor windows, here and there, had lights. Some years back, he had visited a house which, similar to this one, had been converted from residence to gambling hall. While the plans would not be quite the same, they'd follow the general pattern. And one other factor played in his favor. The upper windows, protected from peepers by trees and the steep slope, would have curtains and shutters drawn to admit the breeze.

Garner set out climbing one tree after another. There was now music below. The wind, freshening, made the branches stir. Finally, he got in line with a window through which he could see the pink and

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gilt canopy of a four-poster bed, and part of a dressing table surmounted by a large mirror framed in lacquer. A woman was at the table, brushing her hair.

He could not see her face, for the angle was wrong. Her hair, long and dark and lustrous, told him nothing. Had he arrived earlier, the coiffure might have identified her. The soft yellow candle-light tricked him. He couldn't tell from her bare arms whether they got their warm tint from yellow candle-light, or whether the lady had Latin coloring, with perhaps a touch of Chinese. Then she turned a little: and there was no mistaking Syria Hale's profile.

Garner descended to get to another branch. Working his way out on that one brought him close to a balcony.

Somewhere down the hallway was a candelabrum whose indirect glow made his approach easier. The branch dipped. There was a warning crack. Garner caught the balcony railing. The branch whipped up. For a moment, he stood on the narrow platform, hugging the jamb of a door glazed all the way to the threshold. Inconsistently, it was not guarded by bars, whereas the windows were.

He spent some moments persuading a rusty hinge not to squeal. Then, after leaving his hat on the platform, he stepped down the hall which intersected the broader passage that ran fore and aft. Chinese matting covered the floor. While this hampered him, it would also give warning if anyone approached.

The light from the big chandelier of the stair-well was mirrored by teak ballusters. He was unable to pick any American voices from the confusion of Portuguese, down in the salon. Looking aft, he noted that the end of the main passage was almost in darkness. He could just discern another stairway. Light reached from under two thresholds.

At the door of the room he had spotted from the outside, he knocked, the way he had several times tapped at Syria's stateroom, lightly, yet with a peremptory crispness, a move of one used to command. Not even studied courtesy or a light touch could change its character.

THERE was no answer, but a chair moved, and then came the sound of wooden-heeled boudoir slippers. Silence was followed by an almost noiseless drawing of a bolt.

Footsteps sounded from his right. Someone was coming up the front stairs. Garner shrank into the door-recess, shouldering the heavy jamb. Whoever came up the hall wore hard shoes.

He was in a thorough sweat before the door eased open. There was not even the whisper of a hinge. The room was dark, except for sky glow, heightened by the first trace of moonrise. As he slipped edgewise past the jamb, he heard the breathing of silk, and felt the clinging touch of it in brushing past the wearer. The perfume was sweet and heavy. Even before the door closed, he was sure that this was not Syria.

"Senhora," he groped, *"desculpe-me—faca-me o favor—onde Senhora Hale—"*

He bogged down. The girl drew a sharp breath. Seconds passed, endless and agonizing. Garner stood there, throat tight and lips dry. He knew a few more words of Portuguese, but he could think of none. *"Faca-me o favor,"* he repeated, hoping that his halting and pointless "please" would convince her that there was no need of bringing the house down about his ears.

She answered in English, "Captain Erskine, why is this, please go."

"I am not Captain Erskine. I followed Miss Hale."

"You are not invited?"

"No."

"How do you get in?"

"Over the wall."

"To see her?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

Silence. Then, "You do not want her father to know."

He let out a deep breath. "You understand. Nobody must know."

"Who are you?"

"Someone she wants to see."

There was a tapping at the door. The girl's hand closed sharply on Garner's arm. She whispered something he couldn't get, and leaned against him to direct him toward the window. The knock was repeated. She answered in Portuguese, then gave him a thrust toward the back of the big four-poster. Her gown rustled as she hurried to the door, and asked a question. Her well

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feigned sleepiness reassured Garner, who needed assurance.

Whatever the discussion was about, the man in the hall made little headway. One thing he could get was *"nao,"* hitting a higher note each repetition. Finally, however, she agreed, but still did not open the door.

When she touched a match to the tapers on the dressing table, he saw a girl somewhat younger than Syria. Her skin was the color of Jersey cream; her eyes, large and very dark. But for their faint slant, he'd never have suspected she was an Eurasian, for her nose was thin and high bridged, with no Mongolian flare at the nostrils.

She tiptoed to Garner's corner. "I must go to the *salon,* I do not want to, but I must."

"Syria Hale? Where is she?"

"You wait." Her smile, showing dazzling teeth, was not happy. "You are lucky. She does not have to go."

He began to understand why she had admitted him without question: as a guess, she had been expecting someone not on the guest list. He saw an enormous teak chest in the corner. It was big enough to conceal a man. Something about her smile told him that it was empty. Her own doings made her a ready ally for anyone else having a secret rendezvous.

She went out into the hall, and quickly came back. Then she stepped into an alcove. When she came into view again, she was wearing a crimson gown, and a lacy mantilla. During his climb from her window, and toward the balcony, she'd made a quick job of doing her hair.

Syria Hale entered without knocking. The Eurasian whispered, "Bolt the door. When I come back, I go to your room."

Syria pounced for the bolt. Then she turned and looked Garner over from head to foot. "You aren't quite real," she said, after a long pause, during which she clung closely to him. "Somehow, I knew you'd get ashore, but—oh, good God, I couldn't be sure—whatever made you come here? How did you pick on her door?"

GARNER seated himself on the teak chest, then got up, lifted the lid, and confirmed his guess. It contained largely emptiness. "Just in case of surprises." He winked, and told Syria how he had recognized her profile.

"The mirror in my room was frightfully clouded," she explained. "So I came in here. Antonia developed a very sudden headache, right after one of the maids smuggled her a note. No wonder she let you in so easily!"

"I had to see you before I went to Canton. So you'd not take it for granted I was shark bait."

"I didn't know how far you'd filed, but I couldn't believe you'd lose your head and go over the side unless you had a chance. Only—well, it was pretty terrible! What's in Canton for you?"

He told her. As she listened, Syria's eyes narrowed. Finally she cut in, "You must've done some horoscoping, darling. Tang, the governor of Kwang Tung is here tonight."

"About buying that opium?"

"I think so. He and Senator Texiera are hand in hand."

"Why the big to-do? It's handled openly at Junk Fleet Entrance, and Lintin Island, and Kum Sing Mun."

"Commissioner Lin is coming to Canton."

"The Emperor's special agent?"

"Yes. He has the imperial seal. Power of life and death over every living thing in Kwang Tung Province, including Governor Tang. They say Lin can't be bribed, he's bound and determined to stamp out the opium trade."

"A mandarin who can't be bribed . . . oh, they have them in China, they've always had them, but they're generally kept hidden and gagged."

"Lin has everyone worried. He's been issuing orders, and they're strict. A few little dealers have been beheaded already, to make a good showing."

"Captain Butler, how's he fit into this?"

"I don't know. Except he has to step lightly, he's walking on eggs."

"Governor Tang's down below now?"

"Yes."

"Being sociable, or—"

"Dad and Joab and Butler expect to talk business later on. In Dom Joao—the senator's library."

"You know where that is?"

"Of course—good heaven, Denny, don't

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be crazy! Going to Canton alone, one white man on a Chinese boat, that's wild enough, but *this,* it's not worth the risk!"

"I won't know till I try. If Lin is really death on smuggling—look here, Syria, your father won't be taking a personal part in the delivery?"

"No, he won't."

"All right. So I'll play Lin's game to get the boost I need to play my own."

"Our own, Denny. I'm so muddled up, trying to figure the rights and wrongs of this opium business, but that trickery off Foochow was plain piracy—I'm through with Joab, I think I always was through with him, only I didn't know it."

And these were the best words he'd ever heard. "Because when his luck broke, it'd break all at once?"

"More than that, darling, much more. He's always so God-like sure of himself. That's fascinating at first, one can't help but find it so. But it finally becomes just too much!"

"That's the way I found it. Now let's see about that library, and the governor who's beheading opium peddlers with one hand, and smuggling opium with the other."

XI

BY A DARKENED side-stairway, Syria guided Garner to the senator's library, where the conference would take place, once sociability in the *salon* was over. In the leather and tobacco-scented gloom, he held her for a moment, and whispered, "I don't know yet how I'll leave, whether to risk the porter at the gate, or come up to go out your window and over the wall."

Then, barefooted, she tiptoed for the service-stairs; and Garner picked his way along book shelves; he skirted massive tables, and carved, high-backed chairs. He groped along a lacquer cabinet, and then a teak screen.

A monstrous vase, its glass greasy-slick, told him of its graceful shape.

There was a lingering residue of tobacco, and old brandy, sandalwood and a breath of jasmine. The scent of the room was comfortable and luxurious; but the traces of Asiatic perfume made him uneasy. It didn't belong in a man's part of the house. . . . It made him think of Antonia and her lover. . . .

Finally he backed well into the corner, squeezing past the dusty hangings of heavy velvet. The traceries of a screen suggested concealment which would let him look as well as listen.

He heard the guests leaving. Carriages pulled up, and went away. Governor Tang's palanquin and eight coolies would be squatting at the gate, asleep but ready to pick up their burden. There'd also be an escort of soldiers.

Finally Chinese servants came into the library to light the tall candles. Dom Joao, a thin-faced, swarthy man with prodigious black mustaches, came stalking to the door, where he paused, bowing and ceremoniously gesturing for his guests to precede him.

Hale and Erskine stepped in.

The governor, wearing a puce-colored silken robe embroidered with a Manchurian crane, clasped his hands, bowed, and politely held back. Dom Joao bowed, gestured. *"Haca me o favor,"* he said, then spoke in Chinese.

The mandarin bowed until the top of his pork-pie hat, which was topped off with a ruby and a coral button, levelled off like the muzzle of a field piece. Finally, the host consented to enter his own library. There was more of this before the confreres were seated; the governor of all Kwang Tung province made a ceremony of being unworthy to accept the seat of honor, until Dom Joao finally persuaded him.

Servants set out brandy from Portugal. The fruity bouquet billowed into Garner's corner, a luscious odor, forthright, nothing thinnish like cognac.

Cheroots—and a *cloisonne* box of tobacco for Butler's briar pipe. The first fume of it added to Garner's conviction that while being a senator in Macao was far from heavy work, it paid well. "Plenty of Latakia in it," he decided, and then stopped, for the blend was deceptive as it was full bodied.

But Tang, the governor, most interested Garner. The man's face was plump, and jolly. His bright little eyes covered everything. Despite long nails, protected by golden shields, his hands were beautiful to see. Each seemed to have a life of its own, an individual expressiveness, brought

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out by flicks of a fan whose ribs were of jade.

His interpreter was a solemn faced fellow in a turquoise robe and black cap. He stood, hands concealed by his flowing sleeves. Tang spoke English, haltingly, but not pidgin. A bland, an affable, a likeable man. Yet for business, it would not be proper to use a barbarian tongue.

"Gentlemen," Dom Joao finally began.

THE conference was on. Tang, remote as a carved Buddha, came to life only when his interpreter rendered what the master had already understood. Tang would reply, and it was possible that Dom Joao understood; but the interpreter put it into Portuguese, and then into English.

"Do not worry," was the substance of what Governor Tang told his associates. "Commissioner Lin has the Imperial Seal, yes. He is going to reform Kwang Tung Province. Yes. But it is written and it has been said, *all rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea remains bitter.* The Central Kingdom is a sea. And Commissioner Lin forgets that the biggest river starts from a very small spring."

Erskine, Hale, and Butler fiddled with their brandy glasses, with pipe and cheroot. Dom Joao said, "A small foot can dam up a small spring."

It became a formal game of fencing with proverbs and sayings, some of which went flat in translation. Ideas, like the faces of aristocratic Chinese ladies, were not to be exposed grossly, nakedly, shamelessly.

"There must be a few noble examples," Tang went on.

His expressive hands conveyed, without anything as definite as pantomime, strangling and beheading.

"And some seizures of opium, to prove zeal," Tang added. "Commissioner Lin has demanded seizures, and capital punishment."

Hermon Hale fidgeted and mopped sweat from his forehead. He ran fingers inside his stock to loosen it from his neck. Erskine didn't change countenance. Butler gave him a wink and a wry grimace that meant, "See why I don't like Canton. . . ."

"Er . . . how about those British men-o-war?" Hale demanded.

Tang radiated friendliness and assurance. "There will be more of them. They do not know Commissioner Lin, they do not know the Imperial Seal."

"What are the American factors doing about Lin?" Erskine asked.

Tang gave him an ambiguous smile. "Some Americans do one thing, some do another thing. It is written, do nothing, and then there is nothing that you cannot do."

"That's damned foolishness," Hale grumbled.

After the interpreter gave a polite rendition of this, Tang explained, "It means, not moving too soon, before moving is needed. Dom Joao understands."

"Sim, sim!" the senator exclaimed. "Commissioner Lin, he does not understand. He acts too much and he acts too soon. Wait till the British warships tell him something!"

Erskine asked, suavely, "You have spoken to the fleet commander?"

"We do not misunderstand each other, senhor."

Nobody could say, "Two plus two equals four." Chinese and Portuguese alike insisted on putting it, "Eight divided by two equals four." And while Garner had won further insight into opium intrigue, he did not yet know how Endurance Potter stood; whether the Hale & Sutton factor was to be fired, or browbeaten into handling opium, or whether Commissioner Lin's demands for capital punishment would include the representatives of American and European trading companies.

There was a good deal to be learned. He might have got most of the answers had not a gray-haired, worried-looking Portuguese come into the library to address Dom Joao in an agitated whisper.

The senator looked as if a horse fly had stung him. Then he composed himself, got up to bow to Governor Tang, and next, to Hale, saying, "These gentlemen will excuse us. By your leave, and with your gracious permission. Please come with me. My *major domo* begs pardon, but must have a word with you."

HALE blinked, flashed Erskine a look, and got up.

Erskine and Butler fingered their chins and looked wooden.

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Garner became tense. He was worried at the furtiveness and uneasiness and ill-concealed embarrassment of the master of the house. The *major domo* acted as though he'd been sitting on an ant-hill. Something was wrong on the top floor. Syria must be involved. Thinking of Antonia's lover did not make it any easier for Garner. Perhaps Antonia's accomplice, finally waking up to the fact that it had not been the young lady's admirer who had prowled the upper floor, had started something which was now out of control. He had an impulse to kick the screen aside, level his revolver, and take charge. He was more than ordinarily indebted to the lovely Eurasian, whose one scream could have finished him.

Hale followed the senator and *major domo*. Butler reloaded his pipe. Erskine lounged and eyed his cheroot. Governor Tang sat there, fingering his jade-ribbed fan. Casually, he whispered to his interpreter, who left the room. In the silence, the thick felt soles of his shoes made a slip-slopping sound. Tang smiled good-will at the two Americans.

The three ascending the stairs did not make as much noise as they should have. Their tense attitudes keyed Garner to the cracking point.

From the front gate came Chinese voices, the rasp of a bolt, the creak of a hinge. There were vague sounds as of something moving carefully. Nobody trusted anyone in this business. Butler became alert. His eyes were now sharp as his leathery face. Erskine sat like a rock. Tang's fan made slow motions like the swaying of a tiger's tail.

Upstairs, there was a crash, a tearing of wood, a wrenching of metal. A woman screamed. The blast of a pistol made a coughing echo. From the front came yells, the clang of arms, the pounding of fast-moving feet. A woman cried, "Dad, keep out of this!"

Tang remained seated and fanning himself. Erskine and Butler jerked to their feet. Garner kicked the screen crashing before him. Pistol levelled, he yelled, "Keep your noses clean!"

He raced for the stairway, just as the governor's Chinese soldiers came bursting into the vestibule.

XII

THE hall reeked with powder fumes. Dom Joao still gripped a pistol. His face was the color of a cordovan boot. He licked his lips as if to limber them up for further speech. In the doorway of Syria's room stood a good looking young fellow whose sallow cheek was raked as by a bullet. Pieces of mirror twinkled on the floor. Antonia clung to him, as though to shield him from another shot. Dazedly, he groped at her arms.

Powder flecked his face. He was still numbed by concussion, and by surprise. Syria, wearing a figured silk robe over her nightgown, tugged at Hale's arm. "This is none of your business, get out of it!" she demanded.

"I thought—I thought," Dom Joao stuttered, finally regaining use of his tongue, "this was happening in your room! I am sorry—I am—"

Then Hale saw Garner. "Well, it might have been! We're both in the same boat!" He cursed, and the senator joined him.

The *major domo* looked happier. In reporting what he had considered a grave irregularity involving a foreign guest, he had unwittingly brought outsiders to see Antonia's disgraceful doings. But Garner's presence justified him.

"Dom Joao, you see?"

"Dog of dogs of dogs!" the senator howled, "I see, but you are still a fool!"

Garner, pistol at his hip, took it all in. "I heard you scream," he began. "I thought some dirty work—"

"Denny, get out of this, they're following you!"

Erskine and Butler came racing down the hall. Garner sidestepped to get his back against the wall.

"Hold it, or I'll drop you, the both of you," he shouted.

"Might as well surrender, the court's full of Chinese soldiers," Erskine said, but raised his hands.

"Antonia," the Portuguese intruder said, and got himself clear of the sobbing girl. "This is between your father and me. *Senhor*, my family is as good as yours, I will give you satisfaction. Unless you wish to send for a loaded pistol to assassinate me."

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The senator began to remember his dignity.

But Antonia screamed and intervened. "No, no, no! Manuel, you must leave, you must go, you can't fight him!"

"I'm leaving!" Garner said to Antonia. He had not understood the exchange, but he'd got its sense. "You, Manuel!"

He gestured. The young Portuguese nodded, sidestepped. Syria edged to the door of the room whose "borrowing" had caused all the confusion. She had barely backed over the threshold when Erskine took advantage of Garner's distraction. He lunged, striking the Colt out of line. Butler darted in. Manuel yelled, and whipped out a thin-bladed dagger. Erskine's fist nearly dropped Garner in his tracks.

Then Syria smashed a vase over the skipper's head. He collapsed, and shook the floor. Antonia cried out. Whatever she said, Manuel got Garner straightened up, and hustled him after Syria. And as they cleared the threshold, she slammed the bolt, and gasped, "Well, we've gained a minute, shove some furniture against it."

"Window's barred!" Garner muttered. "Chinese army beating around in the garden."

Manuel said, "This window, she is wood."

THE bars were dummies, and not, as on the ground floor, iron rods firmly seated in the masonry.

A knocking at the door. "Open up," Hermon Hale demanded. "What in God's holy name do you think you're doing! Senator, you tell him!"

Dom Joao picked it up in Portuguese. Manuel answered. Then, to Garner, "He tell me I can leave for now."

"That's your business." Garner yanked the bars, frame and all, from the opening, and started unwinding the cord about his waist. "I am leaving. Did he tell you I am wanted for mutiny?"

"Ah, mutiny. Yes, yes, also for—ah—seeing this young lady. I think I go with you. Where you go?"

"Canton."

"Good. The fight with Dom Joao, if I kill him, is bad, if he kill me, is bad."

"Why not settle the argument and marry the girl?"

"After this—this what you say, embarrassment—it is—"

BUT Garner had no time for the niceties of Portuguese etiquette. Dom Joao was pounding the door, and cursing. Whether or not he wanted to meet Dom Manuel on the field of honor, dignity demanded that he insist on the meeting. But for having a Chinese governor in the house, the affair might have been smoothed over. The Americans really did not count, being people with no more sense of honor than the British, as far as the ladies of the family were concerned. The Chinese were otherwise, and "face" had to be maintained at all cost.

"Break it down!" Butler was shouting.

Erskine had recovered enough to echo the cry.

Garner stepped to the sill. Dom Manuel looked squeamish, but nodded. When he saw Garner jump, and connect, he bowed ceremoniously to Syria, and followed.

"You forget to say good-bye," the horrified Portuguese reminded him, as they worked their way "outboard," along a branch which overhung the spike-topped wall.

Garner bent the line. "I'm heavier. If it doesn't bust with me, you can make it."

He let himself down. The branch bowed dangerously. He got his feet between the spikes on the wall. The crown was wide enough for a fair foothold, but he teetered uncertainly for a moment before getting his balance. Slowly, he let the line pay out through his hands, to avoid a sudden whipping and snarling.

"All right, Manuel."

But the Chinese soldiers, despite the sound of their own chattering, had heard the cracking of branches. They yelled. They thrust with spears. They brandished long swords. Erskine, still groggy, came running out into the garden. The moon was now high enough to show that he had a pistol, probably one of Dom Joao's.

"Come on!" Garner yelled. "I'll hold 'em!"

Manuel came down the line. A musket rumbled, and a one-ounce slug whisked past. Garner cut loose, just as Erskine's weapon missed fire. The branch whipped up, snapping the line into the branches, where it entangled itself.

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Erskine, flinging his useless pistol to the ground, began to shout and point. The Chinese got the idea, and raced after him toward the front gate to intercept the fugitives.

Garner said, "Like this, and watch it!"

He jackknifed, and before he got off balance, he snatched the shanks of two spikes and kicked clear. Once stretched hanging against the outside of the wall, he let go. His height and reach reduced the drop. Manuel, wavering on the wall, hesitated to make the shift which might impale him, or drop him headlong to the ground.

"Jump, damn it, jump!" Garner howled.

Manuel lurched. Garner lunged. He broke the fall, but the two tumbled in a heap, and both were battered. Manuel however got to his feet, and gasped, "This way—"

He limped. Neither was Garner good for fast foot work. Nevertheless, they got the corner of the adjacent estate behind them before the pursuit came howling around the forward corner of Dom Joao's wall.

Lights showed in neighboring windows. Residents, aroused by the disturbance, leaned out. But as he hobbled along, Manuel wheezed, "They look, they don' talk—is not—good knowing—what happen—"

Portuguese tact, Garner figured, and was grateful that this wasn't an Anglo-Saxon community.

Meanwhile, Macao would be sifted. The colony covered no more than eight square miles.

"Waterfront," Garner panted. Then, when Manuel didn't change his direction, "*Leste! O mar! A praya!*"

"*Nao!* No good!"

He headed north, for the barrier which marked the limit of Portuguese concession.

"*Um soldados!*" Garner objected.

"Sure, I understand. You don' understand." Manuel paused for badly needed breath, and made a brave attempt at smiling. "You understan' the *subir*—the climb, me, I don't. But—"

"Go ahead, my friend, I don't understand getting out of town. *Correto!*"

It turned out that Manuel did know his business. When the Chinese guard challenged, he answered in a gibberish that Garner took to be a blend of at least three languages, including Cantonese. The corporal of the guard came out. Manuel laid a trade dollar on the ground.

Garner broke into a sweat and a fidget as he watched the bazaar style bargaining, and listened for the approach of pursuit from the south. Once, Manuel paused for an aside: "Is bad hurry, these man think we do something naughty, get scared and stopping us."

After agonizing moments, the corporal settled for three Spanish dollars. Manuel bowed, gestured for Garner to precede him. Garner, gritting his teeth, bowed and gestured for Manuel to go first. At last they walked shoulder to shoulder over the frontier. The soldiers were satisfied that they had been dealing with gentlemen. However unusual their appearance and the hour, they were superior persons, neither fools enough to pay the twenty dollars asked, nor criminals who had to be extravagant.

"Now," Manuel said, as they followed a rutted trail which skirted a well manured field, "I find some boats. Dom Joao, he is send police by the *praya,* where we do not looking for boat."

XIII

MANUEL quickly found a *tanka* boat, so called for being shaped like an egg sliced lengthwise. The crew, two square rigged Chinese girls who had been sleeping under the sliding bamboo canopy amidships, objected strenuously to shoving off at that hour. Manuel, however, wheedled until the stocky wenches took their stations.

One, sitting on a low stool in the bow, pulled with a short paddle. The other, at the stern, sculled and steered with a long oar. They were barefooted, and wore brownish-black trousers and loose jackets of the same color. They were far more at home afloat than ashore, for the *tanka* was both residence and way of livelihood.

Garner and Manuel, after taking off their shoes, stretched themselves out on the quilted mattresses the crew had vacated. Both deck and high bulwarks of the "egg boat" had been kept scrubbed clean. Whatever else these aquatic gypsies might be, they were good housekeepers.

"You sleep a little, I watch."

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Without thinking, Garner handed Manuel the Colt.

"No, is not river pirates I think of, is to see these ladies not stop moving, not take us wrong place."

Garner took the gun. "Hell, I couldn't sleep on a bet. You try it, I'll watch."

"Maybe pretty soon, I am busy thinking, like you."

HIS tone suggested that he wanted to talk, so Garner prompted, "Leaving your young lady is a pretty sad business. But that trouble will blow over."

"No, it stays bad. Macao is too small. I have insulted Dom Joao. His family, my family, three hundred years now, we live there, the home country is a foreign place, we are not Asiatic, we are not Portuguese, we try to be both," he concluded, sombrely.

"The senator wouldn't let you marry Antonia?"

Manuel straightened up. "No, *my* family do not let."

"I thought Dom Joao is a pretty big man."

"Very important, oh, yes. But—is Chinese blood in the family." A long pause. "You are too polite, you don' say, is in all Macao families. Most all. But, everyone pretend is not."

Garner began to get it: just as in parts of Spain, where nearly every family had a touch of Moorish, or Jewish blood, and strenuously denied it, so here, the leading families fiercely denied the facts. In his despondency, Manuel acknowledged what he'd otherwise would not have: "Like my family."

"So that's it? Well . . . then maybe you can talk them into sense. You'll be going back, this will blow over."

"Yes, some time, I can go back. But what good? The Chinese blood, maybe that I can talk away. Only, now it is a scandal. They cannot accept Antonia, nobody else can. You see what I did, I am a damn fool, all is bad now, no hope for us. Just like with you."

Garner saw no point in rubbing it in by explaining the difference between Anglo-Saxon and Latin conventions. So he said, "And I'm wanted for mutiny."

Manuel was cheered by the presence of someone in a worse fix. "What you doing now?"

"Mmmm. . . . I don't know till I see a friend in Canton. "What're you going to do?"

"Maybe go to Manila. But some time, I must come back to my people."

"Why not take Antonia along to Manila?"

"Then I can't ever go back to my people."

An over-dose of family. No matter which way the boy turned, he was butting into a stone wall. And he had talked himself out. Garner yawned. "If you're going to stay awake—"

"*Sim, sim.* You rest."

Garner did not wake up until the *tanka* girls pulled up to the bank to cook breakfast. They were jolly, robust creatures, and despite the night's paddling against the current, they laughed and chattered. Their black eyes had an undimmed sparkle. Manuel interpreted, "They say, we stay under the roof, so other boat people not see. This girl, she stays awake watching, that one, she rests, maybe by noon, we start going some more."

As nearly as Garner could tell, without going forward far enough to expose himself to the scores of other boat crews in the vicinity, they'd made Kum Sing Mun; not far, as miles went, but rugged work, paddling against the current.

They cleared Junk Fleet Entrance, and finally, the Tiger's Mouth, where the Pearl River narrows down to a width of two miles. A clipper, with all sails set, was standing up the river. The customs mandarin who had inspected her cargo was hauling for the Chuen Pi station, on the east bank. Thus far, trade had not been stopped, either by Commissioner Lin, nor the British fleet. Garner kept a sharp lookout astern, and prayed that he wouldn't see the *China Queen* making for Whampu.

His anxiety proved to be needless. Nor had she overhauled them by night, for she was not berthed at Whampu. Garner let out a long breath, and relaxed. He began to realize how tired he was, and how battered. Only five miles to go—

"Wake me when we get to Hale & Sutton's pier," he said, and stretched out on deck.

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AND it seemed to be no more than a minute later when Manuel shook him, and the boat scraped alongside the landing. Shakily, he stood on the pier for a moment, watching the *tanka* girls shove off. They'd take their time finding passengers for the downstream run. They'd make a series of short hauls, since normally, no one would engage a *tanka* for such a long trip. But that made no difference, for even if they hurried back to Macao, and chattered about their unusual passengers for Canton, it would have little effect on Garner's plans. Whatever happened would happen quickly.

Manuel went with him toward the row of factories outside the southwest angle of the walled city. Canton was at the bend where the Pearl River swung into a stretch which flowed almost due east for fifteen miles before the channel reached south again.

The foreign quarter, the *Shameen* into which were jammed the thirteen European factories was low-lying ground reclaimed from the river. Creeks, flanking the gray masonry walls of the Chinese city, made a network which raised a stench at low water, and menaced the settlement during flood season. North of the *Shameen* was the Sai Kwan Quarter, a tangle of bazaars, taverns, bawdy houses, and the shops of ivory carvers and other artisans.

All this was an old story to Garner, but as he crossed the narrow paved stretch between the *quai* and the fronts of the solidly built factories, the familiar scene became one of painfully keen interest. The Stars and Stripes, high over Hale & Sutton's place, betokened at once refuge and menace.

Chinese guards were posted at the doors of the factories. This was not unusual, yet it seemed that their flat faces were troubled. They eyed the two bedraggled white men, and exchanged glances. Garner stalked past them as though he owned the place.

Chinese *compradores* and *shroffs* glanced up from their accounts. The clicking balls of the abacus went silent. When the deft Mongolian fingers resumed their play, an American clerk left his desk to interpose.

"Ah—er—whom do you wish?"

"Mr. Potter," Garner announced, as from the poop of a ship. "You needn't bother showing us in."

Having the true temperament of a clerk, the man decided against bothering the visitors either with attentions or the contrary.

And then the two stalked into the inner office, where a middle-aged man, hearing the latch click, set aside a ninety-day-old New York paper, and took off his silver-rimmed spectacles.

His face was nearly coffin shaped, with long jaw, and long, squarish chin; his sunken cheeks, his big nose, his thin-lipped mouth all combined to make him a picture-book Puritan. But all that was cancelled when his eyes, which were brown instead of the biting gray or blue that one would have expected, lighted up and gave a friendly glow to his uncompromising face.

"Well, my goodness! Mr. Garner!" He thrust out a narrow but muscular hand which had an amazing grip. "What's this, what's this? I'm happy to see you, but—ah—I'd got no news—"

"You shall, very quickly, Mr. Potter. First let me present *Senhor* Dom Manuel . . . um—"

"De Bettencourt e Cabral, your humble servant, sir."

However the boy usually mangled English, the compliments were as perfect as his bow.

"I am honored, Mr. de Bettencourt. Please sit down."

The deeply-lined face became severe again. Garner's guess was, that Endurance Potter had by now guessed that something wrong had happened, and was having a grim time of it, suppressing the questions he wanted to ask. He clapped his hands, spoke to a Chinese "boy," who brought decanters from a cabinet built into the teak paneling.

Dom Manuel's face brightened, his nostrils twitched as the bouquet of wine from the Madeira Islands rose from the glass. "My compliments, sir. This beautiful Camara de Lobos!"

GARNER'S left brow rose a bit when the Puritan poured a tot of Jamaica rum black as Chinese ink, and thick as syrup. Potter explained, "Ah . . . I've found it counteracts fever."

"It does, sir."

They bowed, tasted their liquor. Then Garner began, between puffs on a cheroot,

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"Let's—get to brass—tacks, sir. Dom Manuel has practically made himself an outlaw and a renegade in guiding me to your office."

"My goodness, Mr. Garner." The factor choked and fumbled for a handkerchief. "What—ah—what is this?"

"Opium. And mutiny. I was in irons."

"Dear me!"

"Mr. Hale came on this voyage. The new *China Queen.*"

"Mr. Hale! Gracious, what is he doing here?"

"When he is through diddling around in Macao, you'll hear, and you'll not enjoy it. He has not come to thank you for refusing to handle opium."

Garner eyed Potter, and decided that the factor had not changed his attitude.

"Do you care to tell me more?"

"Everything. Then it's up to you to decide whether to turn me over to the American consul, or help me get away."

"Mutiny." The factor shook his head, drew a deep breath. "I am—I shall be in an awkward position."

"You don't have evidence to prove I'm guilty."

Potter brightened a bit. "To be sure, to be sure."

Garner went into the story. Dom Manuel took delicate, cat-like tastes of the Madeira, and spent long moments gazing thoughtfully into the golden-brown wine. It was quite too beautiful to be gulped in American fashion. Finally he spun the crystal stem, and canted it a little, to watch the light play from a new angle. The fruity perfume surged upward, and about.

He wasn't trying to understand the details of Garner's crime. He had nothing in common with the man, except that the American, like himself, had had a romantic tryst which had backfired.

Potter cut in, at last, "But that was compounding a dirty traffic with piracy!" His voice rose. "British honor—American honor—a terrible blot—low as the traffic is, corrupt as it is, the smugglers always trusted the opium importers, they'd pay often weeks in advance. This will hurt legitimate trade!"

Garner grimaced, and fingered his throat. "It'll do things to my neck, too. I can't prove my story in court, and he can prove I mutinied! Are you for me or against me?"

He settled back to wait for Potter's answer.

XIV

SITTING there, looking at Potter, became the most trying of all the trials Dennis Garner had endured. He could feel, as a tangible impact, the man's thought and concern, but he could not guess the trend. Potter might hold that regardless of his own sentiments, it was for a court to decide what should be done with Garner; and that it would be his duty to see that he did not escape.

Finally Potter said, "You know it is impossible for any *fan kwei* to go inland except with a strong guard."

"Missionaries do it."

"You are no missionary. You haven't the background, nor the temperament, the willingness to be murdered for a principle, and without lifting a hand. You are like every other seafaring man I've seen. You've visited every port in the world, and aside from twenty word smattering of each of a dozen languages, you're as ignorant of foreign customs as any upstate farmer. The American Bar in a hundred ports—that's all you know. Your world is the poop deck."

"You mean, it used to be. Very well, I'll ship on the next *prahu* bound for the Philippines. Manila men aren't fanatics, except the Moros, and you can trust them not to turn against anyone they've accepted as a passenger."

"Yes, you can go to Manila. But with Spain and Britain not friendly, you'd not fare any too well. People are surprisingly ignorant as to the difference between an American and an Englishman. While the two breeds are grudgingly respected for one quality and another, they're also despised and disliked."

"What can you make of what I've told you? Do you know Commissioner Lin? I told you, Hermon Hale is ashore in Macao with his daughter. Whatever happens through our whacking up a deal with Lin will only hit Erskine and Butler, and to hell with them. Not that I want it that way, but if Lin should get hold of them

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and behead or strangle them, I'd not be broken-hearted."

"Too bad, much too bad, such a brilliant master going off on such a vicious tangent."

"You've not told me how it totals up!"

Mr. Potter put his hands together, palm to palm, and precisely. "I do not know. The situation is very bad. Lin has arrested most of the *hong* merchants, even Hao Kwa."

GARNER whistled. "Why, he owns all these factories!"

"Precisely. And the *hong* merchants are the outlets for opium. They'll pay silver for opium when they'll not pay silver for anything else. That's why my management of this factory has been—well, comparatively poor. Hale & Sutton has to buy silver elsewhere in order for me to have the wherewithal to pay for tea and silk. Our competitors import opium, sell it for Chinese silver, and use that to pay for cargo for the States."

"I know all that!" Garner exclaimed, impatiently. "Though a lot of our cargoes have done well enough on a barter basis."

"Please don't break in. As I was saying, the *hong* merchants are links in the opium chain, and being Chinese, they're liable to the full penalty of local law. After arresting a baker's dozen of them, Lin threatened to behead several."

"Why just several? They're all equally guilty."

"The river is closed to trade. This happened while you were coming upstream. Elliot—Her Majesty's superintendent—stopped all trade, to keep Lin from beheading several merchants."

"Amiable chap, this Lin. Because he'd not dare touch Europeans, he threatens Chinese heads."

"And says that we—all of us, including me, mind you!—are guilty of the blood of the men he's going to behead!"

"The murderous devil!"

"According to Chinese principles, he is a just and incorruptible judge, a man of 'bigoted virtue.' While his person isn't sacred, that's the only respect in which he is not the Emperor's very self come to Canton. He cannot, as the Chinese see it, do wrong."

"But Tang, that double dealing Tang!" Garner fairly shouted. "He's admitted, I heard it myself, that he'll keep in the clear by lopping off the heads of a few peddlers, and then, at a figure sufficiently high to pay for the risk, see that the *China Queen's* cargo is smuggled up the river. Expose that to Lin!"

"Don't you see that Lin would lose face by admitting that a subordinate was capable of betraying him?"

"Oh, so he'd laugh it off!"

"He'd attend to Governor Tang privately, and for some offense in no way connected with opium. You'd get no thanks at all, and no benefit!"

"These damned Chinese!" Garner raged. "Every time I think they make a little sense, I find I've been dead wrong!"

"Please be patient, Mr. Garner. You think they're subtle, inscrutable, thinking backwards and having emotions just the reverse of any normal human's?" He didn't wait for the obvious affirmative, but went on, "You're quite wrong! The Chinaman, for instance, thinks you're utterly mad, incomprehensible for feeling that to ambush an enemy is dishonorable. Since an enemy is a man to be killed, only a fool gives an enemy a chance to strike back or escape."

Garner said nothing.

Potter continued, "You shook hands with me, to show you didn't have a knife ready to use. The Chinaman clasps his own two hands. He proved that both his right and his left hand is empty! He writes his name backwards, you tell me. But look at this directory—" Potter thumped a red book. "We've arranged ours with surnames first, just the Chinese way! Admitting in this case, that their way has logic. And so on—as I said, you've sailed now for nearly fifteen years, you know absolutely nothing, you've not even tried to find out!"

"I'm more interested in sinking—"

"So am I. But going to Lin with the story is hardly the way."

"You're as roundabout as any Chinaman!"

"I'm not wanted for mutiny, am I?"

Garner gritted his teeth. "And you've not dabbled with astrology either," he added, bitterly.

The whanging of gongs, the beating of drums, the blare of trumpets shook the

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windows. In the outer office there was a scurrying of felt-soled shoes, the clump-clump of hard heels, a chattering of voices whose pitch kept rising. The young American clerk, Mr. Wayne, came dashing in. His face was the color of green-pea soup, and his cheek twitched.

"They're going to murder us, sir! Soldiers! Musketry—"

"Firecrackers," Potter corrected.

"I'm afraid I'm excited, sir."

Dom Manuel got up, drained, regretfully, the final small pool of Camara de Lobos remaining in his glass. "This is like home," he said, blandly.

More martial music. They followed Potter to the front. Chinese soldiers were lining up between *quai* and factory. Others, out of ranks, were driving a stake in the narrow plaza. To this a cross-piece was secured with rattan withes. A minor mandarin supervised from the height of a palanquin carried by four liveried coolies.

A squad of soldiers had a prisoner whose hands were lashed behind him. The fellow was ragged, and dish-faced, just another one of Canton's eight hundred thousand. The sullen expression was from old times. He looked as if the afternoon's event didn't in any way concern him. If he saw anything about him, he gave no sign as they led him to the stake.

A crier sounded off. Potter's interpreter explained, "That is Ho Lan Kin, dealer of opium, Honorable Lin's august decree condemns him to die for dealing in forbidden filth . . . let this be example to all the 'furtive dragons' who smuggle . . . and let all men know that the Foreign Devils are to blame for the death of Ho Lan Kin . . . give respectful attention!"

A pause. The harangue was repeated. A crowd gathered, sullen and muttering and wrangling. The soldiers held them in place.

Factors from the adjoining buildings came to their doorways. Garner muttered, "Pretty how-do-ye-do! Making our front yard an execution ground!"

"It is worse than merely an insult," Potter said. "In a way that peculiarly touches the Chinese mind, this puts a curse on every factory in the block. It is a way of making us, all of us, responsible for Ho Lan Kin's death."

"That's crazy!"

Potter caught his arm. "I quite agree, but it's not your part to take a hand." His thin mouth tightened. He stood on the bottom step, glanced right, glanced left. "But someone—"

Garner pointed. "There's a like-minded Britisher."

The ruddy, heavy-jawed factor of Jardine & Matheson was stepping forward, making for the mandarin. Potter, empty-handed, joined him. As Garner caught up with him, Dom Manuel followed. They couldn't hold back, yet Garner was light-headed from the idiocy, the futility, of risking what prestige required.

Potter said from the corner of his mouth, "Get back, you fool! You're both too ragged and dirty, you'll make me lose face! Get back, I say, this is bad enough as it is."

Garner halted, laid a hand on Dom Manuel's shoulders. "He's right." Then, as they retreated, he wished he had given Potter his revolver.

They were pinning a placard on the condemned man's tattered blue jacket. Potter jerked it away, trampled on it, and turned on the mandarin. He addressed him in English. The British factor folded his arms until Potter was done, then rumbled a denunciation.

"This is Her Majesty's property. I shall tolerate nothing of the sort. Take this man away at once."

The mandarin's interpreter sing-songed the translations.

The mandarin toyed with his fan. He looked as though he had not seen or heard anything. But at the end of the speech, by which time a dozen other factors had joined the first two, the mandarin gave a command.

The guards untied Ho Lan Kin, and marched him away.

The factors went back to their respective factories.

Once indoors, Potter mopped his gleaming forehead. "I feel somewhat faint," he muttered.

"We're surrounded," Garner said, and pointed at the cordon of troops.

A Chinese employee came from the rear. "The back doors are blockaded," he announced.

The crowd was cheering, jeering, squab-

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bling. Though pleased at the blocking of the execution of one who catered to their favorite vice, they started half a dozen fights. They began pelting each other. Rocks flying wild smashed windows. Police finally quelled the riot. A crier came to announce, "*Fan kwei!* You are in the protection and custody of the Honorable Lin's army. You will not leave, but your Chinese servants must leave. No one will enter. This is enforced by extreme penalty! Hear with respect!"

Potter smiled sourly and said, "Mr. Garner, your new troubles will make you forget your old ones. We are in for it."

XV

UNDER penalty of having their families condemned to death, the Chinese employees of the factories had to leave. Garner said to Potter, as they searched for rations to tide them through the siege, "The *hong* merchants lose their heads if you factors don't order the depot ships to turn their opium over to Lin. And if the depot ships won't cough up, I guess it'll be some of our heads. Right?"

Potter stopped taking boxes of tea biscuits from a locker. "Yes, if Lin could be sure there wouldn't be reprisals. I hope Hermon Hale values my head at even half the figure I set on it."

"What do you mean?"

"I signed a bond, before Lin came to Canton, guaranteeing that Hale & Sutton would not trade in opium."

"You signed?"

"Why not? We never did deal in it."

"I begin to see why you don't care to tell Lin about Erskine's trick, off Foochow!"

"Do you blame me?"

It seemed now that Garner's flight to Canton had not only failed to give him any advantage against Erskine, but had ended by making him a hostage responsible for Erskine's violation of Imperial decrees. Potter smiled sourly, and not at the small stock of biscuits which would be the ration as long as it lasted. He said, "That would be the height of irony, your being a mutineer to protest against opium, and now being in danger of the chopping block because of Erskine's smuggling!" Seeing that there was no answer, he turned to the interpreter, who had remained because he had no relatives in Canton, and began to dictate a petition to Commissioner Lin.

"*In that Hale & Sutton have never, directly or indirectly, dealt in opium, we submit to your lightning glance this request that we be permitted to resume trade, pursuant to the terms of the bond executed at your August Command*—very well, write it the way it should read for an Imperial Commissioner! But stick to facts!"

The interpreter set to work with his ink brush.

"*Lightning glance!*" Garner snarled, and shook his fist. "*August Command!* August be damned and damned to hell!"

"Is such language necessary, Mr. Garner?"

"It hasn't helped much, not so far," he dolefully conceded. "Tea biscuits, good Lord! Any other supplies?"

Once more, martial music sounded. Instead of answering, Potter went to the front. The guards had built bamboo shelters to protect them from the sun. At the moment, they were on their feet, and in respectful attitudes, since two dignitaries with retinues were approaching.

"Tang, the Governor of Kwang Tung Province," Potter said, designating the more important of the two.

"I saw him in Macao, the pie-faced son of a —!" Garner grumbled, and then, "Say —who's the other one?"

"That? That is Tang's naval aide, Fu Wha Cheng. He commanded a small fleet of war junks till he was promoted."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, I should be! You look sick."

"I've got reason."

The embroidered tunic, the pork-pie hat, the plumes, the fan with mother-of-pearl ribs, these things did make a difference; but there was no denying that the hard, angular features, and the intent eyes were those of the smuggler chief who had been tricked on the deck of his own lorcha. As the palanquins came nearer, Garner's fears were confirmed. He backed from the window, and told Potter why.

"He was looking me smack in the eye, when I came on deck, yelling and motioning. He'd know me again, and he'd not know I was against the robbery."

"For lack of Captain Erskine or Amos

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Butler, Fu Wha Cheng would be happy to take it out on you. But you told me the *China Queen* had been disguised—"

"Unfortunately, *my* figurehead wasn't."

Potter fingered his chin. "The Honorable Fu would hardly expect to find you here. He wasn't with Governor Tang that night in Macao."

"Remember, I broke cover and Tang saw me. He must have heard of me in Macao."

"Mmmm . . . if he recognizes you, you mean he'd hold you as a bargaining point?"

"How'd he bargain?" Garner demanded. "And what about?"

"He's probably paid for the opium aboard the *China Queen* and now he can't get it because trade has been stopped by British order, and Lin is scaring the smugglers to cover. But unless they search the factories, you're safe enough."

TANG'S troops, however, were not coming to break into the buildings. They went to the *quai,* to drag from the river half a dozen pleasure boats belonging to foreign merchants. These boats were beached, and smashed to pieces. When the destruction was complete, the music sounded off; the Governor and his retinue marched away.

By this wanton destruction of property, Governor Tang was feeling out the foreign merchants, to see whether there would be a protest or talk of reprisal by British gunboats. From this he could gauge his next move. Meanwhile, his gesture would win him favor with Commissioner Lin.

"First it's boats," Garner summed up, "next it'll be a search of the factories, and next—"

Potter cut in, "You are learning rapidly, sir."

"That is right," Dom Manuel affirmed, and broke his long silence. "One of us is accidentally hit by flying rock. Or a mob, it breaks in for loot. You are surprise, sir, that navy officer of Canton is smuggle in Foochow?"

"Nothing surprises me!"

Dom Manuel smiled. "One navy captain is pirate sometimes!"

Potter nodded. "He is quite right. That naval officer tackled the wrong ship, was very nearly captured, and in his haste, he lost his mandarin's cap and his sword."

"What happened to him?"

"I said, he was *nearly* captured. He escaped."

"But the proof he left behind?"

Potter shook his head, sadly. "You disappoint and disillusion me. What kind of a case can one make against a mandarin? And don't curse the Chinese. Consider what happened to you aboard an American ship."

That evening, voices along the waterfront brought the besieged merchants to the alert. Potter and Garner had spent some time inspecting, oiling, and charging muskets and fowling pieces, in view of Governor Tang's suggestive move. Waterfront loafers were teetering on the edge of the *quai,* gesturing, cackling, alternately cheering and cursing.

"You'd think it was a race!"

Potter headed for the second floor. "It may be."

He was right. A ship's boat, flying the Union Jack, was coming upstream. Not far astern of her were two Chinese boats, carrying twice as many oars. They were maneuvering to intercept the fugitive Britons before they could make the *quai.* It looked as if the odds were two to one in favor of the pursuers.

"Who is it?" Garner demanded, as he turned to the stairs.

The answer was not forthcoming until he rejoined Potter, carrying three muskets. The factor, still squinting, shook his head, and said, "The reflection blinds me, I can't tell—here, here, you will make trouble!"

"Oh, to hell with it! If you can't shoot, shut up!"

He knelt, got a rest across the sill, and drew a fine bead. Water jetted up. The bullet whined as it skated along to kick up a second splash. "Load 'er up, Manuel!" he said, and snatched the next rifle. "Their boat's breaking!"

It was ticklish work. He did not want to hit any of the Chinese crew. He merely wished to pepper them with splinters from the bulwarks to worry the rowers.

Another blast. The mandarin's pennant at the stem toppled, dragged into the water. "Remarkable!" Potter exclaimed, and Manuel applauded in Portuguese.

"Accident. Missed my mark and did better."

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THE Union Jack forged ahead. The men landed. With stately stride, they made for Jardine & Matheson's. The pursuit, leaping to the *quai,* yelled and took after them. But the Britishers made it.

"That," said Potter, "is Captain Elliot, the Superintendent of Trade. Something must have happened in Macao to bring him up the river in a small boat."

"Man o' war may've run aground."

"If he'd leave a warship to continue in that cockleshell, it must be urgent," Potter contended.

"News," Dom Manuel said. "Bad news, undoubtlessly."

"That's the only kind for you and me," Garner admitted. "But my bet is, Captain Elliot's come up to have a showdown with Commissioner Lin."

"*Showdown*—what is that you mean?"

"If I can find a deck of cards, I'll make it clear enough. We may as well play cards. We won't be going anywhere, and eating isn't going to take long."

"There are no cards in this factory," Potter said. "But if you can get some from our neighbors, I can hardly object to your using the—the things."

"Does the gentleman also dislike women?" Dom Manuel whispered, as Potter set out for Jardine & Matheson's.

"Our Puritans pretended to," Garner answered, "but judging from results—well, the answer is no."

Manuel got one more look at Potter before he stepped into the courtyard. "He does not have romance in the soul, I think."

"Maybe it was a strong sense of duty that drove them! Now a showdown—not speaking of cards—is what happens when a stubborn Englishman who always knows he is right runs afoul of a stubborn Chinaman who knows *he's* right."

"Ah . . . showdown mean, God-damn big fight, no?"

They settled down to reloading the guns. Manuel's definition seemed to suit conditions. Before they had completed their estimate of how many days the hostages in the factory could survive on tea biscuits, Mr. Potter came hurrying back.

He was sweating. His face was longer than ever. He laid a hand on Garner's shoulder, and began, "Er . . . ah . . . Captain Elliot has brought—ah—but one cannot yet jump at conclusion—"

"Of course I can't! Not till you come to the point! What's happened in Macao? Pirates take over the *China Queen?* Burn her to the water line?"

"Worse. Syria Hale and her father were kidnapped. Captain Erskine was wounded, and is in a coma. There is no word of Amos Butler."

Garner took a step backward, and chewed air for a moment.

"Governor Tang," he finally said, "compared notes on that opium deal with Fu Wha Cheng, and they've figured that Fu was swindled by Erskine. The disguise wasn't perfect, or maybe Tang described Butler and Erskine to Fu."

Potter dashed to his private office and came back with a decanter. "You look sick, my boy. I hate to think—"

Garner ignored the drink. Moving like a sleepwalker, he went to the table, sat down, planted his elbows on it. He had to think, and he didn't know where to start.

Potter tiptoed up, to get the glass within reach, and retreated silently.

Whether Syria and her father had been taken by a pirate gang, working on land, to be held for ransom, or whether this was Governor Tang's reach for vengeance, something had to be done. And Garner could not decide which would be the worst for Syria, being in Tang's hands, or in pirates'!

(Part III in the Next SHORT STORIES*).*

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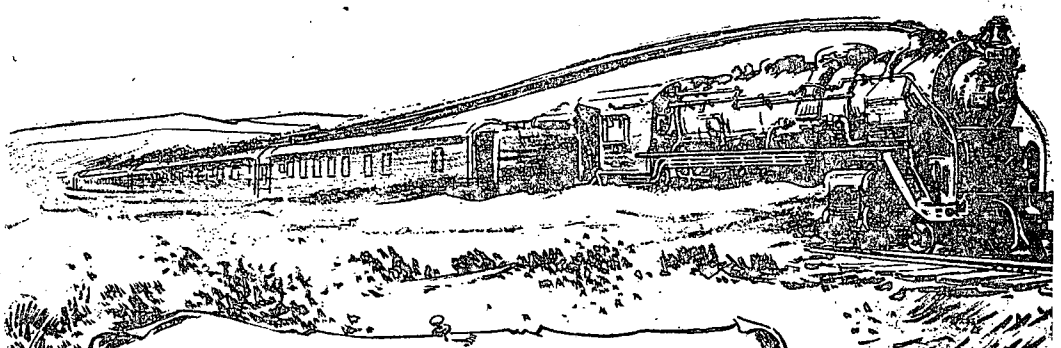

Spring and Us Boomers

By

EARLE FRANKLIN BAKER

SPRING and us Boomers are headin' North,
Who shall we look for, who shall we find
When the Hot-shot's clamor rollin' forth
Stirs up a dream in each Boomer-mind?

Spring and us Boomers are headin' back,
Who shall we see where the "Gardens" sprawl?
Not Old Whistlin' Bill or "Haywire Mac"
Who used to roll with The Cannonball?

Spring and us Boomers are comin' fast,
Wavin' hello to the "Home-guard" crew,
"Hittin' th' ball" when the green-eye's passed,
Boomin' along with a dream or two.

Spring and us Boomers hit Old Railroad Town,
Shuntin' the flangers far to the back,
Boomers from the South all lean and brown
Herdin' the tonnage along the track.

Spring and us Boomers stop in Railroad Town,
Fillin' our craw and our loneliness,
With the beanery queens we play the clown
Findin' "Rail" heaven and happiness!

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A Cloud of Sinister Legend Hung Low Over Haggerty's Ridge

HAGGERTY'S RIDGE

By JOHN E. KELLY

Author of "The Cable," etc.

A MODICUM of culture invaded Trampas County with the establishment of its first and only newspaper, the weekly *Howl*, although its fustian editor and printer's devil pocketed more gold dust for items suppressed than for the smudged editions issuing from his rickety flatbed press. But eighty miles westward, where the Lampa made a final turn and escaped the jurisdiction, the code of the fang and the claw prevailed unaltered. Cynics compared the county to a dinosaur of gigantic size and mouselike brain, with its fifteen hundred whites scattered over an area doubling that of Delaware. In the whole downriver region, where a network of skyscraping canyons made travel a thing of horse-killing

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detours, there were only the tiny settlement of Tyler's Ford and a score of homesteaders, hardly less primitive than the Indians they flushed from covert in endless open season. A man might ride a full day without seeing a cabin or mark of axe or spade.

Old Tim Haggerty had come into Trampas with the earliest wave of goldseekers, but when they settled at the first diggings he had pushed on until his way was barred by the gargantuan wall of the Sourdoughs, running due north under the Pole Star. High on a spur ridge he had built his house, barns and corrals of peeled logs and there, the world forgetting by the world forgot, he had raised his family. It was an unbearably lonely spot, beautiful in unearthly fashion when at morning the view carried over a hundred miles of crest and canyon to the snowclad peaks from which the sun rose. Brooding on the solitude, his eldest daughter went mad and roamed the ridge, gibbering at the squirrels, until a ledge crumbled beneath unwary feet. On a night of full moon, with the lunar disc huge and orange in the cedar tops, turning the earth to silver and the parallel ridges to reefs in a misty sea, when the miasma of melancholy was a tangible, compelling urge, Young Tim laid aside his guitar on the porch rail and wordlessly pressed a muzzle to his temple.

The count of Haggertys in the log house lessened as their number grew on the knoll before the large barn; the last two old-maid daughters moved to a cabin on the east slope of the ridge, where the winter wind was gentler to their aged bones. The hard-won fields yielded to the lupin and the creeping thickets of manzanita.

A strong man might hurl a stone westward from Haggerty's Ridge to plunge into the West Fork of Lampa, two thousand feet below. Time was when the splash would have brought one of the Tidmarsh brothers to his cabin door, rifle in hand. The elder had come from the Coast, seeking relief from an ailment lethal in the fog, and homesteaded in a virgin cove of fertile soil, tucked into the wall of the Sourdoughs. Trained as a chemist, his eye caught silvery gleams in the sandbars of his creek. The Mint confirmed his analysis, platinum, and sent an engineer to check the worth of the discovery. In Tyler's Ford strong brew loosened the stranger's tongue. The ditch and sluice were scarcely completed, the first white metal gathered in the riffles, when Martin Tidmarsh was found dead on the trail, shot with his own rifle. "Must have tripped over a root." No one cared very much, he was a "furriner." His brother came from the East to take his place and lived in savage isolation, gun constantly in hand. The mine prospered; heavy laden with treasure, the new owner set out for the Coast. The river gave up his body near the settlement. "Missed the ford," declared the miners' jury; rumor noted his empty pockets and empty lungs. The Tidmarsh cabin sagged abandoned, its windows vacant as a skull's eye sockets. If surreptitious use were made of the workings, there was none to see. A cloud of sinister legend hung low over ridge and stream; the West Fork was bad medicine, taboo.

SID POCKLETTE of Tyler's Ford had been three days in the saddle to Trampas City. He sprawled in the one-room office of Dry-Gulch Dugan, District Attorney and sole legal practitioner in the county, tapping the desk with a heavy finger.

"I want you should get me some tenderfoot outfit to run the old Tidmarsh mine. I bid it in at the tax sale, but it'll take real money to rig up."

"Tidmarsh?" Dugan's memory clicked. "Wasn't he drowned?"

"So they say," replied Pocklette indifferently. There was the veriest flicker in his dark eyes. It did not pass unnoted, Dugan specialized in family skeletons. Outwardly his query had been entirely casual. He reached for a pad.

"You want to sell?"

Pocklette shrugged. "Want to make the best deal I can. Sell, bond and lease, royalty, whatever's juiciest."

"What did it cost you?"

His client frowned [illegible]ddingly. "That's my business!"

"Suit yours[illegible]; [illegible] collector will tell me," Dugan coun[illegible]negligently.

Pocklette surrendered. "Two hundred dollars," he grunted.

"What are you asking, rock bottom, for cash?"

"I seen the paper from the Mint, when the coroner searched Tidmarsh's cabin.

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There's heavy platinum; I oughta get at least twenty thousand."

Dugan doodled on his pad. "Cut me in, and I believe I know how we can get the mine equipped free and then take it back again."

Pocklette's hard eyes narrowed. "Sounds good, but what's your cut?" He knew Dugan's reputation.

"A half interest and a free hand in making the deal."

His visitor stormed out but returned acquiescently an hour later, as Dugan knew he must. There was no place else to go.

Dugan wrote to an address in Metropolis-on-the-Bay and Larry Gibson rode the stage to Trampas City. Three weeks later he faced Dry-Gulch again.

"Geologically it's all right and if the price is, too, I'll recommend it. But that place gives me the creeps." He shivered reminiscently.

The attorney made a mental note. "Folks hereabout claim it's the downdrafts in those coves make you feel that way. Noticed it myself. Nothing that a good slug of rye won't cure." He smiled reassuringly.

Gibson nodded. "I'll remember to have a bottle on hand, if I'm to run the mine. Now, what's your best figure; skip the asking price."

"Forty thousand dollars, cash."

The engineer arose, gathering his notes. "Nice to have met you. Drop in on me some time in Metropolis."

"Hold on!" Dugan was the picture of distress. "I think I can persuade my client to better his terms. Say a long-term option, small down payment, and after you're in operation a year, give us the balance."

Gibson relaxed. "You're headed right, anyway. Make it thirty, five down, and I'll recommend it." They shook hands to seal the bargain.

High on Tidmarsh Creek a diversion dam shunted the turbulent waters into a new flume leading down to the mine. In the cove a sawmill snarled and screeched, slicing the cedars into planks for sluices and cabins. Gibson recruited a crew of placer men and the precious metal went out on guarded mules to meet the Coast stage at Tyler's Ford.

A glum Pocklette invaded Dugan's sanctum. "Them fellers is makin' a fortune out our gravel! You said we'd get the mine back free." Suspicion was loud in his voice.

Dugan eyed him quizzically. "The place has a bad name, I hear."

"Whaddyemean?" Conflicting emotions fought within his visitor, edging his tone.

"The crew might get cold feet if there were spooky doings on West Fork."

Pocklette guffawed with relief, he'd been imagining things. "I get you! We'll run 'em out and that breaks the contract. I'm on my way!" His feet pounded on the stairs.

FROM the mine, the sky was but a narrow strip of blue silk or star-studded black velvet caught between Haggerty's Ridge on the east and the main bulk of the Sourdoughs behind. No wind stirred the languid air, noises were abnormally loud, reverberating from the mountain walls. Tyler's Ford was too distant for nightly visits; the crew perforce remained in camp, playing poker in the bunkhouse or lolling about an open fire on the tongue of silt where Tidmarsh Creek fell into the West Fork. On a night in the dark of the moon with the bonfire well attended, from far up the menacing inky mass of the Ridge a scream descended, raising hackles on the listeners' necks, echoing back and forth across the river.

"Painter," opined a bearded miner, pausing in the act of throwing a log on the blaze.

"Hooty owl," vouchsafed another.

A resident of Tyler's Ford threw a fearful glance over his hunched shoulder at the glowering Ridge. "Nor beast nor bird," he said in a low tone, "yon's Mad Minnie Haggerty walkin' the cliffs."

"At night?" A stranger was raucously skeptical. "A body'd break their neck up thar in the dark!"

The other nodded somberly. "Jest what Minnie done, nigh thirty years agone."

"Yuh mean to say—" He did not finish. The scream was louder, wilder than before. In the dead silence following, a heavy body crashed through the tree-tops across the river. The men huddled together, some drawing guns. The native found his voice in gloomy satisfaction.

"Mebbe you'll believe me now! That was Minnie fallin'. They say the first time's a warnin'; effen you hear it twicet you're a

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goner sure in a week's time. I'm pullin' my freight in the mornin'."

Half the crew followed his example, despite Gibson's exhortations. At work in his office, he had heard nothing, jeered at the story, desisting only when the men's anger became manifest.

The remaining miners spent Sunday at Tyler's Ford absorbing their fill of squirrel whiskey and eerie tales of the backwoods. They returned jumpy and quarrelsome. On Monday morning the cook burst into Gibson's office, waving a willow twig bound in a hoop. To the manager it was the plaything of idle hands, plaited as another might whittle, but the halfbreed was gray with terror.

"Injun devil!" he gasped. "Sign of death! Me find in path!"

He fled without awaiting his pay. The skeleton crew carried on, loath to venture singly even at midday into the deep woods along the flume. Three days passed without incident and Gibson prepared to seek replacements when just after dark a howl followed by a fusillade brought him on a run to the river's edge. A livid head bobbed on the waves, rolling with the current. Hits drove it under, to reappear instantly, moving mockingly beyond pistol range.

"Jim Tidmarsh!" yammered a miner. "'Tis his ha'nt! He was drowned in the ford here!"

There was no sleep that night. The men spent the hours close about a roaring fire; the least sound from the darkness was greeted by a volley. At dawn they departed en masse and in close order for Tyler's Ford.

GIBSON put in a long day alone, closing down the plant, packing his records. Cooking a sketchy dinner in the deserted cook shack, a faint noise drew his glance through the paneless window. Amid the pines a death's head glowed. In cold anger, gun in hand, he dashed out, striding recklessly directly toward the apparition. He collided with a stout trunk on which the image flickered, rubbing his hand on the pale light. His fingers shone. Phosphorus! To whose interest was it that the mine be abandoned?

He had but barely reached his office in Metropolis when Dugan's letter arrived. ". . . understand work has ceased at the Tidmarsh Mine and the crew has withdrawn. The contract requires continuous operation or relinquishment of your option with all improvements remaining as liquidated damages."

The Company replied, appointing a meeting of all concerned at the mine to discuss the situation. Dugan shied at the long trip in the saddle but the prize was alluring; with Pocklette he met Gibson at the property. The manager was affable and hospitable, he had no intention of abandoning operations, was in fact bringing in new men. Four or five strangers busied themselves about the workings, manifesting no interest in the visitors. Pocklette watched them narrowly, suspiciously. They were greenhorns, not miners. What was Gibson's game?

An inconclusive conference brought stalemate by late afternoon. Dugan rose irritably.

"Will you have my horse brought?"

Gibson demurred amiably. "In a hurry for flapjacks and bear bacon at Tyler's Ford? Why not have an early dinner here? I brought a real cook up from the Coast and there'll be a moon to light you afterward."

The prospect of good food was irresistible to Dugan. Two hours passed rapidly and it was full dusk when with Pocklette leading, the visitors rode down to the ford. The first horse had dipped a reluctant hoof in the swift current when from midstream, dimly seen in the all-pervading grayness, a dripping figure arose, arms waving wildly. The riders recoiled as it advanced upon them. A froglike croaking assailed their ears.

"I been waitin' fer you, Sid, to serve you as you served me!"

Pocklette's voice broke in a shriek. "Jim Tidmarsh! But you're daid; I seen you die!"

Gibson whistled sharply. Two men emerged from the shadows, dragged Pocklette from his saddle and flung themselves upon him, binding him with rawhide thongs. The manager's gun jostled Dugan, another's hand seized his bridle rein.

"Climb down, Mister, with your hands up, and fast!"

Dugan played his high card, bluff. "This is highway robbery," he spluttered, "the law'll take care of—"

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"My uncle's murderer," snapped Gibson, "but not by your hand-picked sheriff, my dear District Attorney. We're taking Pocklette to the Coast and jail while I ask the Governor to supersede you."

Dugan's whirling mind fixed on one word. "Uncles?"

"My mother was sister to Martin and James Tidmarsh. When the Company got your letter, I asked for the job. I heard just enough in Tyler's Ford to convince me they had been murdered for the mine and the killer was still about. When the spook scare started, I knew who stood to gain by having the mine turned back. If the same person knew too much about my uncle's drowning, I had the murderer. Witnesses have just heard his confession, his goose is cooked. Now we'll take up your case."

"You haven't anything on me!" But Dugan's voice shook. Lynching was a commonplace in Trampas County; he had no friends among the grim-faced spectators.

There was icy amusement in Gibson's tone. "Nothing except consorting with a murderer, conspiracy to defraud the Company of its property, which your presence here proves, and a few other minor matters sufficient to have you disbarred in short order."

DUGAN snatched at a straw, the manager had not threatened his life. "Surely you must realize," he pleaded, "that I came into this innocently as attorney for Pocklette—"

"And a half interest in the deal," sneered Gibson.

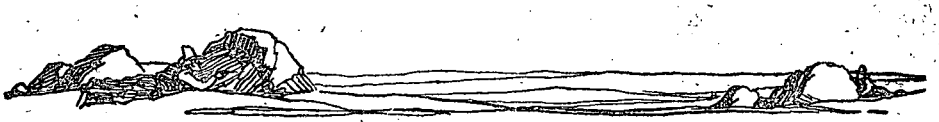
Dugan squirmed, the price was high, but he must pay it. "I'll make that over to you."

The manager shook his head. "To the Tidmarsh heirs. Together with Pocklette's share."

"I can't do that." His brain was functioning again, there was salvage even in this grim situation. The Governor would undoubtedly supersede him, whereupon he could appear as Pocklette's counsel and pocket the half interest as his fee.

"You have his power of attorney and authority to make a deal. All or none! Refuse and you can leave—after my cousins here stroll down the trail a bit first."

Dugan smiled wryly. "Your argument is convincing, Gibson. Have you a sheet of foolscap?"



In poker or in trouble, Long Joe had a motto—"a bluff won't bluff unless you give it plenty of ammunition to bluff with. . . ." But to bluff the job of Texas Ranger, well that was something needing ammunition?

"Long Joe Forks a Bad One"

A novelette in our next issue by

CADDO CAMERON

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WHITE FOX MAN

By H. S. M. KEMP

Bush Pilots Take Enough Chances with the Tree Tops Without Taking Chances with the Law

THE plane was a Lysander. Mounted Police Corporal Bob Reid recognized it as such. Not from any Lysander pictures he may have seen but because he'd flown plenty of them while serving overseas with the R. C. A. F.

Now, when one of the planes landed at Fox River, he merely wondered what had brought such a ship into that part of the North and found himself more interested in the two men that stepped out of it and came up to the store.

He was in there himself at the time, buying a few odd lines of groceries from the Hudson's Bay man, Porky Pearson. The two from the plane walked in, said, "Hullo!" and asked how far they were from the Barren Lands.

To Corporal Bob Reid it all sounded so odd, so matter-of-fact. Like a guy pulling up in a car and asking how far it was to the nearest filling-station. But Porky Pearson, the trader, merely frowned, glanced across at Reid and said, "The Barrens? How far would they be, Bob? Couple hundred miles?"

"All of that," agreed Reid. To the two men he said, "I was only up there once, and quite a while ago. Traveled with dogs."

One of the men nodded. "Dogs, eh?" He turned to his companion with a grin. "That'd be kind of slow for us."

They pulled out cigarettes, passed them around, lit up. The interlude gave the policeman a chance to study them a bit closer.

In dress, they might have been twins. They wore factory-made khaki-cloth parkas with heavy fur hoods; breeches and high socks; fur-trimmed flying boots were on their feet and fur caps on their heads. But in appearance they were miles apart. The one who had spoken most was a blond giant of a man with cold blue eyes; the other was shortish, thick-set and dark almost to the point of swarthiness. Both seemed in their early thirties, and from their general appearance, Reid put them down as a pair of prospectors. But the big man's next words dispelled the theory. To Reid he said, "Ever

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runto a couple of flying wolf-hunters before?"

The policeman's frown showed the surprise he felt. "Wolf-hunters? You fellers?"

The big man nodded. "Yeah. We tried it down in Northern Ontario last winter and it seemed to work. So this year we're taking a crack at the Territories where the wolves are thicker and the bounty's higher."

Reid looked across at Porky Pearson and his Scotch clerk. Porky grinned. "I've heard everything now. But how d'you do it?"

"Hunt wolves?" The big man laughed. "Same as you hunt 'em any place. Find out where they're thick, set out your baits, and trust in the Lord. Or if you want fun, come down low, skim over top of 'em and shoot 'em from the air."

The policeman nodded slowly. "You were talking about baits—"

"I know what you mean." The big man dug into an inside pocket and produced a wad of official-looking papers. "Permits for everything. Trapping permits, permits for automatic firearms. Even permits to use poisoned bait." He smiled. "The Government's glad to play ball. The wolf menace is gettin' 'em down."

The corporal scrutinized the papers. Everything seemed to be in order, and the scrutiny identified the two men as Fred Seymour and William Haire. He handed the papers back.

"Well, good luck to you guys. It's a new racket you've got, but there's probably money in it."

"Should be," agreed the big man. "There's the bounty, the sale of the skins, and a bit of prospecting on the side."

They stood and talked till the cigarettes were finished; then telling the three men they'd be seeing them soon, the fliers went out and down to their ship.

"Wolf-huntin' by air!" Porky Pearson shook his head. "Yes, sir! I've heard everything now!"

In a few minutes the Lysander was a dot against the northern sky; and although the policeman didn't see the two men again, he occasionally heard of them. A few Barren Lands Chipewyans came down to the post and reported the plane as having been seen in their part of the country; and some of the Crees, trapping on the edge of the Barrens, told of both having seen and heard it often. From these latter people the corporal learned that the wolves were more thick that winter than ever before; so he concluded that Messrs. Seymour and Haire would be doing all right.

But he worried little about them; in fact, gave them little thought until the matter of Eskimo Charlie Day came up for attention. And their first connection with Eskimo Charlie happened when Buzz Maynard landed that March afternoon at Fox River.

Buzz Maynard was a bush-pilot; and he and his old Fairchild had a lot in common. Both were tough, both were hard-looking, both were built more on service-lines than with a regard to beauty. Buzz had drifted into bush-flying via the barnstorming route; and he made it his boast that if he shoved the old crate through screaming northeasters or thick, soupy fog, he was at least asking her to take no more chances than he was prepared to take himself. So when, that afternoon, he landed at Fox River out of a sky that was sullen and gray with a ceiling down to the ground, neither Porky Pearson nor Corporal Bob Reid, who was again in the store, seemed overly surprised. The trader muttered something about the Devil looking after his own and the corporal added a word concerning haywire equipment, but neither made a move to leave the warmth of the store. Buzz Maynard's stopping meant that he'd be up anyway.

He did, after first taking the opportunity to remove some of the ice from his windshield.

"What's the rush this time?" the policeman suggested. "Three trips in here this winter, and each time you're scraping the trees."

Buzz Maynard grinned. He shoved the ski-cap to the back of his head and warmed cramped fingers over the box-stove.

"That's the way I like it. Dirty weather, the big boys don't fly. But I do—at whatever I like to charge 'em."

"Meaning—?"

"Sure. They won't risk their own ships—too fancy, too much money tied up in 'em. But if it's urgent and I'm fool enough to take the chance, well, who picks up the marbles?"

Bob Reid smiled. "Guess the Air Force spoiled me for your job. Weather didn't

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mean anything to us. We drew our pay, and it didn't matter if we flew or not."

THERE was a string of ribbons on the policeman's tunic. Buzz Maynard flicked a glance to them, smiled in return. "You drew your pay! With me it's worse—no fly, no eat!" Then he consulted his wrist-watch. "One-forty-five. Figure I can make Kleeyazi Lake by dark?"

"Couple of hours?" The corporal gave a grunt. "Could—with a Mustang."

Buzz Maynard grinned again. He looked bulky in his mackinaw—and with his square chin, high-humped nose and reckless black eyes, more than a little capable.

"Two hours'll have to do it. Either that, or I sit down, drain the oil and scratch a hole in a snowdrift. But tell me, either of you fellers know a guy named Charlie Day?"

Porky Pearson answered. "You mean Eskimo Charlie Day? Sure; hangs out on Vermilion Lake." He asked, "Why?"

"I got to pick him up on the way home."

"Goin' to town, is he?" observed Porky. "Well, his place ain't hard to find. Know the big point in the Lake? Well, it's right there. A cabin, and two-three outhouses."

"I've seen it, now you mention it," said Maynard.

He bought a package of cigarettes from the Scotch clerk and got ready to leave; but just then and from outside came the bump and creak of a toboggan, a sharp "Whoa!" and a parka-clad, stubble-cheeked man stepped into the building and kicked the door shut behind him.

Porky Pearson turned; so did the others. But it was Porky who spoke. "If it ain't Joe Morgan!" He added, "Long time no see, Joe."

Joe Morgan nodded in return. "And she's a long piece down here."

"Long piece is right," agreed Porky Pearson. "And come to think of it, too bad you was in such a rush. Buzz, here, is headin' up to Kleeyazi Lake and pickin' up Eskimo Charlie on the way back. You might's well have had a ride too."

Joe Morgan glanced across at the pilot. "Mebbe you're a bit late for Charlie. He's prob'ly out in Edmonton already."

"In Edmonton?"

"Yeah. I was over to his place a few days ago, and Charlie told me he'd met up with some wolf-hunters and was flyin' out with them."

"Wolf-hunters?" Plainly Buzz Maynard didn't understand.

"Flyin' wolf-hunters," explained Porky Pearson. "Couple fellers named Seymour and Haire."

"And he was going to catch a ride out with them?" persisted Buzz.

"Sure," said Joe Morgan. "Leastways, that's what he claimed."

Maynard digested the information. "Think he's pulled out already?" And when Joe shrugged, he added, "I'll drop in on him anyhow. He's worth fifty bucks to me. And fifty bucks is money."

TEN minutes later, Buzz Maynard and his battered plane were swallowed up in the overcast. Porky Pearson turned to Joe Morgan.

"Well, Joe?" he asked him. "How's tricks?"

Joe Morgan had shed his gloves, and with a moth-eaten ratskin cap shoved to the back of his head he was warming himself at the glowing box-stove.

"How's tricks?" Joe repeated. "Well, I guess they're good."

Porky Pearson seemed surprised. Then a slow grin spread itself over his fat, red face.

"First time in five years, Joe, I've ever heard you say that!"

He glanced towards Bob Reid, embracing the policeman in the humor of the remark. But it seemed lost on Reid. Then, as though remembering, the trader said, "I guess, by golly, you guys don't know each other."

He effected an introduction, said to Joe Morgan, "The corporal was on detachment here till about the time war broke out. Yeah, about the time you come in. Then he joined up in the Air Force and went overseas. Bomber pilot. Got back around Christmas."

Joe Morgan said, "Oh?" and a bit of awed respect flickered in his smoky eyes.

"And Joe," went on Porky Pearson for the corporal's benefit, "traps up on the Owl River. Took over Jimmy Nelson's old camp a few miles east of Eskimo Charlie. I always claimed it was a poor fur country, and the way Joe's bin toughin' it sorta bore me out. But now," grinned the trader, "Joe says things are good." He turned to Joe Morgan. "What's made 'em good?"

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"Foxes," Morgan promptly told him. "Foxes and lynx. The rabbits are beginnin' to die off they say, but there was lots up on Owl River."

The policeman crossed over to the window, scratched a hole in the frost and looked out. "You've got quite a load," he agreed. "And a pretty snappy-looking string of dogs."

Something seemed to intrigue Porky Pearson. The trader lumbered around the counter and made a hole in the window for himself.

"Snappy-lookin' dogs!" he exclaimed. "They oughta be. They're Eskimo Charlie's."

"They was," Joe Morgan corrected him. "They're mine now."

The trader turned. So did Bob Reid.

"Yours?" demanded Porky. "How come?"

"I bought 'em, sort of. At half-price." At the frown on the trader's face, Joe Morgan went on to explain. "I worked for Charlie couple months last summer on them claims of his. He never paid me at the time, but when I was over to his place last week, he said to take the dogs and call it square. I figure," said Joe Morgan, "that the five of 'em at fifty dollars apiece would sorta pay me pretty fair wages."

"Not bad," agreed Corporal Bob Reid. "But what'll this Eskimo Charlie do without them?"

"He said he wouldn't need 'em no more. He made a pretty fair hunt this winter and was goin' to lay off trappin' for a while. He's all for minin' now. Some feller's buyin' his claims for a few thousand, and he's takin' the dough and hittin' up for the Mackenzie. Bear Lake, mebbe."

Porky Pearson put in a question. "What did you do with your own dogs?"

Joe Morgan turned. "Sold 'em to old Tom Otter on the way down here. For ten dollars apiece."

"Ten dollars apiece?" Porky gave a laugh. "Highway robbery!" Then he sobered. "But what are you goin' to do with your fur?"

Joe Morgan didn't know. "I *could* sell it to you and take a beatin', or haul it out to Edmonton or Prince Albert and not lose much on the trip."

Porky indicated the obvious. "But you'd lose time from your trapline. You can't go to town in any couple of days."

"I kin fly out. This feller that was in here just now, he'll be comin' back. What's wrong with me flyin' out with him?"

The trader shrugged. "Nothing, I guess. Buzz'll likely be here again tomorrow."

"Okay, so what?" asked Joe Morgan. "I'll fly out with him. And as for losin' time, I ain't so sure I'll be back in ag'in myself. There ain't no beaver-trappin', so what you got left for spring? Only muskrats; and there's blame few up in my country. No, if I run into Eskimo Charlie, I'll prob'ly try the Mackenzie with him."

Porky Pearson diplomatically told Joe he might have something there; but in the meantime no harm would be done in fetching in the fur and having a price put on it.

But Joe Morgan had pretty well made up his mind. He was goin' to town, and that's where the pricin' would be done. Anyways, he didn't feel like goin' to the trouble of unpackin' it just for the chore of packin' it up ag'in. If Porky didn't mind, he'd just shove off down to old Gabby Collins' place and put up with him till this Buzz Maynard guy came back from the north.

And when he'd gone— "Those bums are all alike!" sneered Porky Pearson. "Tough times, they'll eat outa your hand; then give 'em one good year, and you need a permit to talk to 'em."

"Cheer up!" grinned Bob Reid. "What's one good year in five?"

BUZZ MAYNARD'S old plane was more trustworthy than her looks would indicate; for at noon of the next day Buzz landed her in front of Porky Pearson's Hudson's Bay post. Corporal Bob Reid, from his nearby detachment, saw the arrival and came over; so that pilot and policeman walked into the store together.

Porky and his clerk were getting ready to lock up.

"All alone?" asked Porky.

"All alone," returned Buzz. "Eskimo Charlie wasn't around. I could see airplane ski-tracks from the air but I landed anyway. The door's nailed solid; so he must have connected with that wolf-trapping plane."

"But you've still got a passenger," consoled Porky Pearson. "Joe Morgan. The woolly-lookin' guy who was in the store yesterday."

"And where's he going?" asked Buzz.

He got his answer from Joe Morgan him-

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self. For just at that moment the trapper barged in.

"How's chances," he asked the pilot, "to catch a ride with you? Edmonton, P. A., or wherever you're headin' for?"

"Any old place, eh?" grinned Maynard. "Well, this time it'll be Edmonton. And I'm pulling out just as soon as I can buy a can of bully-beef and some biscuits off the robber here."

"I won't rob you today," grinned Porky. "And I won't sell you no bully-beef. But there's room at the table if you want to set in." He indicated the policeman. "Bob eats with us, too, 'count he can't stand his own cookin'. So if you're ready, we'll shove on up."

The pilot told Joe Morgan to be ready to leave in half an hour; then as the trapper turned, Buzz gave the corporal a smile.

"All's grist for the mill—and I'm not doing bad. Had a pay-load heading in, picked up half a dozen bales of Hudson's Bay fur at Kleeyazi Lake, missed Eskimo Charlie but I pick this other bloke up as a passenger. There's money in them thar tree-tops!"

"Same as the Air Force," grinned the corporal. "Nice pickings—if you live to collect."

The meal, prepared by Porky Pearson's Indian housekeeper, was nourishing if not dainty; and afterwards they went down to Buzz Maynard's old Fairchild.

Joe Morgan was there already. He had four bulky sacks of fur with him and his dogs. Could Buzz handle the dogs as well as the fur? The pilot figured he could crowd 'em in somewhere; and a few minutes later he and Joe Morgan went roaring off on the last leg of the flight to town.

The other men stood and watched. They saw Buzz lift the nose of the plane sharply, saw him leave the river, clip the roofs of the snow-banked Indian house and dodge the steeple of the mission church; and as the outline of it grew smaller and was finally lost in the murky sky, Porky Pearson gave a grunt.

"That's the first time four bags of fur have ever got away on me. And likely," he added, "it's the first time Joe Morgan ever had that much."

The corporal grinned. "Lots of rabbits on the Owl River."

"And lots of poker games, too."

"With this Eskimo Charlie?"

"With them Barren Lands Chips."

Corporal Bob Reid gave a slow, understanding smile. "Gambling with Indians—Chipewyans or Crees—is a criminal offense. Pity, you didn't think of it sooner."

"Mebbe I did," growled Porky Pearson. "Only you know what the Bible says. 'A fool uttereth all his thoughts.' And I ain't that much of a fool."

"And I didn't know," grinned Bob Reid, "that you were a theological student. But it's still a pity. I'd liked to have had a look into those bags." He asked, "What made you think of poker?"

"Dunno." Porky Pearson shrugged. "Only he played considerable around the village last fall. Of course, just for chicken-feed."

The plane and the fur and Joe Morgan were, however, already out of sight; so even had he wanted to, there was nothing that Bob Reid could have done about it then.

BUT a week later, another plane stopped off. This was the mail-plane, on its regular monthly flight. Bob Reid saw it come to rest in front of the Hudson's Bay post, saw the pilot hand a sack to Porky's clerk and take off again northwards.

The few winter residents of the place awoke from their hibernation. When the corporal reached the store he found there the parson, a couple of half-breed trappers and old Gabby Collins. He obtained his own mail and went into Porky's office to read it. When he came out again, he and Porky had the store to themselves.

"Looks like town for me," Reid told the trader. "Medical Board. Air Force stuff."

Porky frowned quizzically. "What do you want with a Medical Board? If you're sick, I must be half dead."

"Just routine," grinned Reid. "I was hit in the lungs, overseas. They keep close check on me in case I put a finger on 'em for a pension." He added. "I'll hop the mail-plane when it comes back tomorrow."

"Okay," said Porky. "And when you're in town, here's a job you can do." He tossed a letter across the counter. "For Eskimo Charlie — only they don't call him that. 'Charles Day, *Esquire*.' It's from the Royal Bank in the city and looks important. Take

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it along and tell 'em Charlie's in town himself."

But the manager of the bank was somewhat surprised when, the next afternoon, Bob Reid gave him Charlie Day's letter and the explanation that went with it.

"That's strange," the manager murmured. "Mr. Day gave a certain party an option on some mining property he owned in the north. The option should've expired four days ago but was taken up in time. In fact, the payment was made into us, and this letter is a notification of it for Mr. Day."

Bob Reid frowned, nodded slowly. "I see." After a pause, he went on. "Mr. Day came to the city somewhere about a week ago. I understand he had considerable fur with him. If he sold it locally, would he—well, would he have dealings with you?"

"Certainly." The manager, who was fat, fussy and important, seemed to resent the question. "He keeps his account with us. Always has."

"Then don't worry," soothed Bob Reid. "Hold that letter for a few days. He'll be around."

But while the corporal had urged the bank manager not to worry, there was a frown on his own face as he walked away. He was still wearing a bit of it as he slumped in a chair in the Mounted Police headquarters, shoved his booted legs in front of him and scratched at his blond mop of hair. To the stout, scrubbed-and-polished staff sergeant across the desk, he said, "You perceive in me, Staff, a somewhat troubled man."

The staff sergeant hooked fingers around his stomach, grinned, and asked the lady's name.

"Not this time," Reid told him. "Fact is, I'm looking for a chap who took off for the city from the north some days ago and doesn't appear to have showed up. He traveled by plane, and as no plane crashes have been reported, I'm wondering where he went."

The staff sergeant grunted. "Who is the guy?"

"Chap named Day. Charles Day. Eskimo Charlie. Take your choice."

"Oh, him!"

The corporal's brows lifted. "Friend of yours?"

"No. But I know more about him than I do of my friends. Trapping now, isn't he?" suggested the staff sergeant. "Up on Vermilion Lake? He moved in there from the Ile a la Crosse side while you were overseas."

"What did he do there?"

"Everything, and everybody—if you can believe reports. We almost got him on a bootlegging charge, but he crawled out from under."

"But where does he get the name—Eskimo Charlie?"

"Used to be up in the Western Arctic; married to a Husky woman."

"But he's a white man himself?"

The staff sergeant shrugged. "Using the term relatively, yes."

Bob Reid grinned. "Whatever he was, he's a solid citizen now. Makes a good hunt, owns mineral claims, sells 'em through the Royal Bank. The one doubtful splotch on his escutcheon is that old bootlegging charge. But today he seems to be missing."

The staff sergeant gave another grunt. "Tell Daddy all about it."

Bob Reid did; and at the conclusion of his story, said, "I may be working up a lather over nothing, but there are one or two points that stick in my crop. They're these: Joe Morgan makes a big hunt this year, such as he has never made before. Eskimo Charlie is supposed to have made a big hunt, too. Then Joe Morgan pulls into Fox River with this big jag of fur and Eskimo Charlie's dogs and spins a yarn about Charlie and him leaving the country and not coming back. But the main thing is why Charlie hasn't been to the Royal Bank to enquire about an option he gave a guy on a mineral claim and which expired several days ago."

THE staff sergeant stirred. "Sounds interesting."

"Then this plane stuff," went on Reid. "Guess you heard about those flying wolf-trappers? Well, that's the plane he was coming out on. Could you find out if it ever got here?"

"Why not? But if it did, it's probably gone again; and you'll learn nothing from that end."

"Try it anyhow," said Reid. "And I'll try it from another."

He reached over, pulled the desk-phone towards him and asked the staff sergeant

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for the telephone directory. And for the next ten minutes he put through a series of calls.

All were to hotels; and on the sixth shot he got results. The clerk at the McTavish said that a "C. Day" had registered there some days earlier but that he had checked out again the following morning.

Bob Reid gave his information to the staff sergeant. Staff gave a grunt. "And when you look into it, you'll find this guy Day was a traveling salesman."

"Maybe," agreed Reid. "But I'm going to make sure."

The McTavish, he found, was one of the smaller hostelries; and apart from showing him the entry in the register of a week previous, the desk clerk said he couldn't be of any help.

The corporal nodded, but he only half heard. For the address of the "C. Day" of the register was given as "Vermilion Lake."

"And he checked out the next morning?" he noted. Then— "D'you remember what he looked like?"

"Never seen the guy," said the desk clerk. "He came in after six o'clock, when the night man was on."

"The night clerk? Well, can we get hold of him?"

"Dunno. It all depends if he's up." The man glanced at his watch, left, saying he'd see what he could do.

A few minutes later he returned with a pallid youth whose oily hair seemed glued to his head.

"Day?" drawled the youngster. "Yeah, I remember him. Feller in a hairy parka and wearin' dark glasses. Said he'd bin snowblind a week before and his eyes still hurt."

The corporal frowned. "Snowblind?"

"Yeah. Claimed he was goin' to seé a doctor the next day and get fixed up."

After a moment, Reid asked, "Anything else you can remember about him?"

"No. Only he was about my height, five-foot-nine or so."

Once more the corporal scrutinized the register, then he looked up at the day clerk. "I want to borrow this sheet. Be all right?" He explained, "I'll get a photostatic copy made of it and hand it right back."

The night clerk gave an indulgent grin. "For that signature? Well, it won't do you much good. That feller Day never wrote it."

"Day never wrote it?" echoed Reid. "Then who did?"

"Me."

Reid's blue eyes went frosty. "How come you wrote it? Isn't a guest supposed to sign the register himself?"

"Yeah, sure. But what you gonna do if a guy's half blind?"

Reid's jaw went hard. The question had him stumped. He suddenly felt baffled, thwarted. Nor did the smirk on the night clerk's face help him a lot.

"Any more damage you've done?" he snapped at him.

"Damage?" The smirk disappeared. "Whaddya mean—damage?"

"Skip it!"

Then Reid suddenly felt a fool. Neither of the two clerks realized the implications involved; and so far as the signature in the register was concerned, the night man had probably acted in all innocence.

He summoned a bit of a grin. "Okay, you fellers. Guess you can't help me much further." Then, as an afterthought struck him, he added, "If you ever run across this Mr. Day again, call up the Mounted Police and let us know."

THE city lights were going on when Reid got back to the barracks. He dropped into the chair he had vacated earlier, helped himself to one of the staff sergeant's cigarettes and rasped a match on the sole of his boot. The staff sergeant regarded him quizzically.

"Well? How's Mr. Day?"

Reid lit his fag. "All right, I guess. But me, I'm more balled-up than ever." At the other man's lift of the brows, he continued. "Mr. Day, I find, is from Vermilion Lake. Which is as it should be. He wears a 'hairy' parka—which is all right, too. But Mr. Day also wears dark glasses, the result of being snowblind a week before."

Staff gave a grunt. "Interesting. Anything else?"

"Nothing that matters; except that Mr. Day is of average height and needed a shave."

"And that's all?"

"Just about. Of course," added Reid, negligently, "the signature in the hotel reg-

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ister wasn't Mr. Day's own. He was too blind to write — so the clerk obligingly signed for him."

The staff sergeant sank lower in his chair, closed his eyes and once again clasped his hands across his belly. "Could be all right—name, description, and so on; but I don't care for this snowblind-and-glasses stuff."

Reid said, "And I don't like it any better than you do. It seems to me that if Charlie Day was snowblind when Joe Morgan saw him last, Joe would have said something about it."

The staff sergeant stirred, opened his eyes. "Mebbe," he said. Then he asked, "When did this snowblind gent register at the McTavish?"

"The evening of the twenty-first."

"That when Joe Morgan hit town?"

"No. Joe got in on the twentieth. It was past noon when he and Buzz left Fox River, so they wouldn't get here much before dark."

"Twenty-four hours of a spread, eh? The thing to do would be to poke around and find out where Joe Morgan stayed that first night. It's too bad," suddenly growled the Staff, "that the Old Man isn't here. He's away, though, down East. What I mean, the only ones who could say definitely if Charlie Day came to the city are those wolf-hunters. They're supposed to have flown him out. If they didn't, we'll know something's haywire. We can find out if they came to the city, and if so, did they go back North again. If they did go back, the Old Man could have chartered a plane and sent you after them. But about all I can do is to put the boys out to hunt up Joe Morgan, and to see if Charlie Day's fur has ever been sold."

"I'll find out about the fur," said the corporal. "The same way I located Mr. C. Day of Vermilion Lake."

Once again the telephone went into operation, and once again Bob Reid had luck. His twelfth call, put through to the Canadian-Siberian Fur Company, elicited the information that a Mr. Day had disposed of a considerable quantity of fur there about a week before. Still holding the phone, Reid jotted the dealer's address on a scrap of paper and told the man to wait at his place of business until he—Corporal Reid—called around.

"Two wonderful words," Reid grinned as he cradled the phone. "'Mounted Police' gets you anywhere." He glanced at his wrist-watch. "Five minutes to six. The Canadian-Siberian Fur Company will be late for supper."

This time, he used one of the Police cars; and it was well that he did. For the fur company was located at the far end of the main business section. And when he reached it, and despite its high-sounding title, he found it to be a hole-in-the-wall wedged in between a livery-barn and a junk-shop.

The dealer, who was short and fat, bald and greasy, gazed up at the tall figure in the muskrat cap and hip-length buffalo coat. He spread his hands, shrugged, and hoped there would be no "drouble."

Reid grinned. "No trouble at all, brother—so long as you play ball with me. Just trot out that fur you bought off Mr. Day."

The dealer turned, opened a door leading to a back room and snapped a wall-switch. Reid preceded him, and found himself in a place as cold as an ice-box and with its walls festooned with fur. Nearest to hand was a wire strung from beams, sagging under the weight of perhaps seventy-five white fox skins. Reid was intrigued, caught by their beauty. Till he heard the dealer speak.

"Zees—zees is som' of 'em."

The corporal blinked. The dealer was stroking one of the white fox pelts.

"Eh?" he got the word out, but there was stark incredulity in it. "You mean—*those?*"

"Cert'n'y! And dose color' foxes, and dose oder fur over dere."

Reid mustered himself together. "Okay. Get 'em all taken down. I want a list of 'em."

"Leest?" The dealer stared. "But I got eet. In my book. Com'. I show you."

They returned to the warmth of the front office, where the dealer pulled down a dogs-eared ledger. The corporal ran his eye down the quantities, the description, the amount paid. The fur totalled exactly forty-two hundred dollars.

"Even money," he observed.

The dealer spread his hands. "Ve argue, ve chew d' rag. Und den foity-two hunnert I pay, or avay he is takin' 'em."

The corporal dug out a memo book and copied the list.

"What did he look like, this Mr. Day?" he asked when he had done. And the an-

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swer was what he had expected—a man, a snowblind man, in caribou parka.

"And of course," suggested Reid, "he produced his trapping license?"

The dealer smiled ingratiatingly. "Positif'ly he perdooced it! Ain't dat d' law?"

THE staff sergeant, an inquisitive and a patient man, was waiting when Reid returned to the barracks. One look at the corporal, and he said, "So the trip paid off."

"The trip paid off," agreed Reid; and for the next ten minutes he gave the staff sergeant a resume of his visit to the fur company. "So," he concluded, "with white foxes in the picture, it seems the next move is to contact those guys Seymour and Haire and find out what they've been doing beside hunting wolves."

"Too bad we didn't know all this a few days ago," grunted the staff sergeant. "While you were gone, I did a bit of phoning myself. And you know something? Al Richards of the Airways tells me the Lysander was in town last week. It only stayed the one night, then hit back north again."

"In other words," said Reid, "if I want to contact them now, it means chartering a plane and hitting out after 'em."

The staff sergeant wriggled uneasily. "I don't know so much about that chartering stuff. If the Old Man was here—" He debated the matter with evident perturbation. "Still," he insisted, "we've got to make some sort of a move. How about chiseling a ride with one of the freight planes? I mean, pay 'em something but not charter 'em outright. Or what about Buzz Maynard? That bird'll fly you anywhere for a dollar."

Reid grinned, stood up. "If he's in town—"

"He's in town. I saw him today."

"Then I'll make a deal with Buzz. And don't worry, Staff," Reid assured the n.c.o.; "my swindle-sheet'll be a model of rectitude."

He went out, had supper, and found Buzz Maynard in the rotunda of the Strathmore Hotel. The pilot was studying the sport pages of the *Bulletin*, but when he saw Reid he tossed the paper aside.

"Hullo!" greeted Buzz. "Heard you were in." He asked, "Trouble?"

Reid allayed his fears, then asked him when he was going north again.

"Right away," said Buzz. "First thing in the morning. Why?"

"I want to catch a ride. Specifically, to Vermilion Lake."

Buzz gave a grunt. "I'm loaded for Katimik River; but that's only sixty or seventy miles west of the Lake. If we did swing over to Vermilion, we could still be back before dark."

"Not if I find what I expect to find at Vermilion," Reid told him. "Confidentially, Buzz, it'll mean going up to the Barrens. Or into them. I want to contact those two wolf-hunters—you know, Seymour and Haire."

"Do, eh?" Maynard frowned. "Quite a chore. The Barrens are a big country."

Reid nodded, thoughtfully. "You telling me!" He took a cigarette from a package of Cravens, offered the pilot one. "I'll trade you a match for a smoke."

"No matches and lost my lighter," grunted Buzz. "And you don't know where these wolf-hunters are located?"

"Do they locate—or are they always on the move?"

"I guess so. Always on the move."

Reid went across to the hotel desk, bought a box of matches, lit his cigarette, came back and handed the box to Maynard.

"So you don't think you'll tackle it? This trip after the wolf-hunters?"

"Sure, I'll tackle it! Why wouldn't I?" demanded Maynard.

Reid grinned down at him. "There'll be a dollar or two in it, Buzz."

"There'll be plenty of 'em," grunted the pilot. "If the Government's paying the shot!"

So, with a full load, they took off at daybreak the following morning; and at five thousand feet, Reid resumed the conversation of the night earlier.

"As I was saying, Buzz, after Katimik we'll hit first for Vermilion. According to what Joe Morgan says, Eskimo Charlie Day is supposed to have flown out with these wolf-hunters. We want to know if he did fly out with them. If he didn't, it's pretty certain that he didn't come out with anyone else."

"So what?" demanded Buzz. "Why fool with your wolf-hunters? If he didn't come out, he's still there."

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"Yeah," said Reid. "And that's what we're afraid of."

"Afraid of?" the pilot turned to stare for a moment; then he gave a canny smile. "You don't say much, but I'm beginning to see the light."

"You are, eh? Then tell me something," suggested Reid. "Have you ever run across Joe Morgan since you flew him out?"

"No. And for a very good reason," said Maynard. "Once he'd sold his fur, he was hitting for the Mackenzie. He said he was going to hook up with this Eskimo Charlie."

"And you don't know where he stayed in town?"

"With friends. Though he never said what friends they were."

THE old plane snored on. They left the last of the farming country and flew over a checkerboard of spruce and swamp and muskeg. For a hundred miles or so, Buzz turned the controls over to Reid.

"No Mosquito or Lancaster about this crate," Buzz apologized. "But there's nothing like keeping your hand in."

They reached Katimik River at noon; and after dinner at the embryo mining town, Buzz swung the nose of the Fairchild north and east for Vermilion.

Now the country flattened somewhat; there was less muskeg, more jackpine, a bleaker-looking terrain. They were still two hundred miles from the Barrens, but the country seemed to inherit an influence from them. So that when the Fairchild circled the spruce-lined, irregular pattern of Vermilion Lake and landed in front of Eskimo Charlie's shack, a sense of isolation and aloofness was already built up.

Nor was this helped by the air of desertion that hung over the place, by a pair of wheeling ravens; nor by the heavy silence that followed the choking of the Fairchild's engine. Reid turned to Buzz Maynard. "Let's see what it's all about."

The door of the cabin—as Buzz had reported—was nailed solidly; but with the aid of an axe from the plane they forced a way in.

The first thing that struck the corporal was the stale, inside air; the next, the amount of stuff that the cabin contained. If Eskimo Charlie had left the country and was not intending to come back, he had been pretty prodigal with his belongings. Some clothing still hung from nails driven into the walls, and there was a fair supply of food in the cupboard.

The place was comfortably furnished for a trapping shack; and with a small radio on a bench, an eiderdown robe on the bunk, and a couple of rifles in a corner, there was more evidence of a man being away on a visit than permanent desertion.

Reid frowned, looked about him. In contrast to the solid log construction of the walls and roof, Eskimo Charlie had never bothered with floorboards. The floor was covered instead with spruce-tips.

"Indian style; lazy man's style," Reid said to Maynard. "But I dunno. There's no need for scrubbing; and if you change the boughs often enough, the place is always sweet."

But the corporal had more than floor-coverings to worry him. He moved about the cabin, taking mental inventory of what he saw. There were rock samples on the window ledge, prepared bait on one of the shelves, and over in a corner of the room, a half-dozen empty bottles.

They were whiskey bottles; and when Reid picked one or two of them up and put them to his nose, he made a grimace.

"Whew! Snake oil—with the teeth left in!"

There were no labels on the bottles, and after another sniff, the corporal looked across at Buzz Maynard.

"I'm remembering something—something Bill Wallace, the old Staff in town, told me. Something about Eskimo Charlie crawling out of a bootlegging charge over at Ile a la Crosse." He squinted thoughtfully. "Did I tell you that Eskimo Charlie Day is a white-fox man? That he is supposed to have sold a big bunch of white fox skins in town? Maybe I didn't, but I know now how he came by them. These wolf-hunters flew him in his booze, and then flew him north to peddle it. Nice work, mebbe—if you can get away with it."

Over in a corner of the room was a nailed, wooden box. To Bob Reid it might contain more bootleg liquor. He went outside, retrieved the axe, intending to use it as a pry. But the head of the axe was loose, rendered so by the use of it on the door.

He gave a grunt, took the thing in both

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hands, and drove the butt of the handle smartly on the floor. But instead of resetting the head, the handle sank into loose, soft earth.

Reid, unprepared, almost went over with it. "Gosh!" he grunted. "Thought it'd be packed real hard—"

He kicked the boughs away, frowned, then suddenly dug at the soft earth with his fingers. He tried it with his foot, put his weight on it—

"I saw a spade outside, Buzz. Leaning up against the wall. Fetch it in."

With the spade he went to work. He dug down one foot, two feet, while little beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. Buzz Maynard offered to lend a hand, but Reid declined. "It's easy. Too easy altogether—"

Then the spade touched something soft and yielding; and digging with his fingers, Reid uncovered a section of reddish, checkered shirt. A few minutes later, with Buzz Maynard's assistance, he dragged out the limp dead body of Eskimo Charlie Day.

THEY wrapped Charlie in a flannelette blanket and cocooned him with a length of line. Buzz Maynard's hard face was set more hard than ever. "Looks like we go after them wolf-hunters for sure."

The corporal nodded. "And after that, hunt up Joe Morgan."

Buzz squinted. "Joe Morgan?"

"I doped it out coming up on the plane. Like this—" said Reid. "These wolf-hunters flew Charlie around the Barrens on some sort of a trading stunt. Now we know it was liquor trading. They hauled in his liquor, too. And with Charlie being able to talk the language, they made quite a clean-up in white foxes amongst the Barren Lands Huskies. Finally, when the scheme was worked to death, they dropped Charlie off here at his camp and said they'd pick him up later on. Then into the picture steps Joe Morgan.

"Joe calls on Charlie and sees him with this swell bunch of fur. He knows darn fine there are no white foxes within miles of here, so he gets hep to Charlie's little game. He probably does a bit of blackmailing, puts the finger on him; and there's a row. In the row, Charlie is killed. But that don't worry Joe. He just swipes the fur, grabs Charlie's trapping license and pulls into Fox River with a cock-and-bull story of making a big hunt and being given Charlie's dogs. No wonder he wouldn't let Porky Pearson take a look at the fur! Then he hops the plane with you for town and sells the fur to some fly-by-night dealer up a back alley." Reid smiled grimly. "I'll tell you the rest of it on the way home—the snowblind stuff, registering at the McTavish, and having the night clerk sign for him. But first, let's get done with Charlie."

Ready to begin, however, Reid paused. "Wonder should we fill that hole? Some poor coot may come blundering in here in the dark and break his neck in it. Here, gimme the spade!"

He went to work once more; but almost at once the spade struck something that gave off a faint metallic clang. Reid poked around, found the thing, picked it up.

It was a cigarette lighter.

He gave a grunt. "Charlie's, I guess. And a good one."

It was a good one, a Ronson.

Rubbing the damp earth away, Reid saw, set in its dull-coated side, a little silver shield. The shield held some engraving—the letters, "B. M."

"'B. M.'" Reid repeated the letters. "Funny. They're not Charlie's initials."

He glanced up, across at Buzz Maynard; and he was startled at the odd, tight-lipped and malevolent expression on the pilot's face. The pilot was staring at the lighter, at Reid, at the lighter again.

"What's the matter, Buzz?" Reid demanded. Then, when Maynard continued to stare—*"Buzz!"*

Suddenly, the pilot relaxed. He smiled; and casually his right hand slid into his mackinaw pocket.

Reid was puzzled, until, out of nowhere, the meaning of the initials on the lighter struck home. "B. M."—Buzz Maynard. Or "Basil Maynard" to give Buzz his proper name. The lighter belonged to Buzz.

But still he didn't understand. If Buzz had dropped the lighter in dragging Charlie from the hole, what of it? There was no need for Buzz to stare at the thing like that. Then came another recollection, and it was one that left Reid unnerved and with a numbed feeling in his stomach. A recollection of himself and Buzz in the rotunda of

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the Strathmore in Edmonton; of offering Buzz a cigarette and wanting a light from him; and of Buzz's answer—"No matches and I've lost my lighter—"

Buzz hadn't dropped that lighter just now. He'd dropped it when he had dug that hole for Eskimo Charlie Day!

Reid looked up, and he suddenly knew that in the pocket of his mackinaw Buzz Maynard was holding a gun. He wetted his lips; and when he spoke, he was surprised that his voice was so calm.

"So it was you, Buzz? Not Joe Morgan. And it was you that fetched in his liquor and flew him around the Barrens?"

"Sure, Bob. It was me." There was a smile on Maynard's face but his voice was agate-hard. "And there isn't a thing you can do about it."

Reid looked back at him steadily. "You own up to it, eh? You admit you killed him, too? That after the pair of you had got all the fur together, you rubbed him out—just like that!"

Maynard slowly shook his head. "You're a little bit wrong, Bob. I was going to pick him up and fly him to town, but he tried to double-cross me. He was going out with these wolf-hunters; and I nailed him for the crook he was. There was a row, and, well—" shrugged the pilot "—he ended up with a broken neck."

"But you took the fur anyhow," went on Reid, accusingly. "You had it on board that day you came south with the Hudson's Bay fur and picked up Joe Morgan. You registered at the McTavish the next evening after selling the fur for forty-two hundred dollars— But why go on? You know it all."

"Sure, why go on?" There was a thin edge to Maynard's voice. "It's all finished, all cut and dried. This is the end of the picture."

Reid waited. He felt his heart hammering against his ribs. But his voice was still good.

"Okay, then. Why don't you shoot and finish it? I can't get my own gun out in time."

MAYNARD smiled. "Shoot? No need for that. There's been too much killing already. And why should I shoot? Aren't you a pal of mine?"

"Pal of yours?" There was a harshness in Bob Reid's voice. "You were, Buzz. But that's all washed out."

The pilot shrugged. "Have it your own way. I'm drifting, anyhow." He drew the gun from his pocket. "Hands up and start walking. Down to the plane."

Reid started. There was nothing else for it. A few feet from the Fairchild and at Maynard's orders, he came to a stop. "Now face the other way."

With his back to the ship, Reid wondered what would come next. Then he felt the snout of Maynard's revolver boring between his shoulder-blades as the pilot's left hand came round, unsnapped the lanyard and drew the Police .45 from its holster. After that came a banging and a thumping, and Reid turned his head in the direction of it. But Maynard's voice halted him.

"I've still got you covered, Bob. So don't act silly!"

In a moment or so, Maynard spoke again. "Handcuffs, Bob. Yours. I'm leaving you here, shackled. There's wood in the cabin, and enough grub. I'll tell Porky Pearson about you—tell him you're sick or something. Okay; turn around—and watch it!"

The corporal faced him. That fierce look was still in Maynard's eyes and the gun in his hand was steady. Maynard jangled the handcuffs. "All right. Let's see 'em!"

Suddenly, Reid's brain worked lightning fast. If he was to outwit Maynard, beat him to the punch, he had about two seconds to do it in. A frontal attack would be suicide; for despite the evenness of his manner, Maynard was cornered, and desperate. All that was left was stealth.

He began to chuckle, and he made no move to hold out his hands. He was looking at Maynard's gun, and the chuckle increased. With it, puzzlement clouded the pilot's eyes.

"Look who's talking!" jeered Reid. "Talking about shooting—*with a gun like that!*"

Maynard's move was sub-conscious. He dropped his eyes for a second—and Reid drove in.

Only two steps were required, two steps and a smash to the jaw. But the manoeuvre was never completed. Reid heard the blast of the gun and felt the burn of the bullet along his side. But the force of his rush carried him into Maynard bodily, and they went over together.

After that, it was a struggle with Life

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itself at the stake. Reid grabbed Maynard's gun-wrist and deflected it. He hung on in teeth-gritting desperation while they rolled and twisted and squirmed. Maynard fought to tear himself free; Reid, to control the hand that held the gun.

It came between them. The policeman felt the metallic hardness of it pressed against his stomach. His left arm was locked around Maynard's neck, holding the pilot's stubbly, sweating face against his own; and he felt the man's lunging efforts to twist the gun into play. Then, suddenly, there was a second blast. It was muffled, as though by distance. Then with a racking, convulsive shudder, Maynard's body slumped down—a soggy, dead weight across Reid's chest.

THE OLD Fairchild droned south. Reid was at the controls; and he stared through the whirl of the propeller to the distant, purpling horizon. Beyond that horizon, miles beyond, lay Edmonton. It seemed impossible that only that morning he'd left the city with Buzz himself at the controls. Now, after an age of time, he was returning; and Buzz was still with him. But it wasn't the old Buzz, the cocky, capable, hard-faced Buzz Maynard of the tree-tops. It was cold clay, with a hole in the chest and wrapped in a canvas cover.

It was cold clay, too, that shared the back-end with Buzz. Eskimo Charlie had peddled his last crock of hooch, gypped his last Chip or Husky, double-crossed his last pal.

"And I cocked an eye at Joe Morgan," mused Reid. "Took it for granted that every man was a liar and because a chap had never made much of a hunt that he never would. And those wolf-hunters, Seymour and Haire—

He pondered the matter, while he held the Fairchild on course.

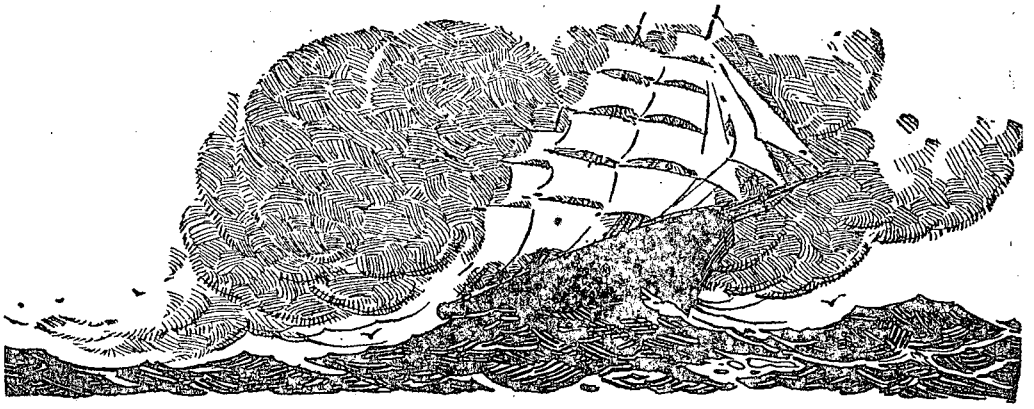
Buzz had been a fool; he wanted to get rich too quick. All was grist that came to his mill, but he had been too free with his gristing.

He had taken chances enough with the tree-tops without taking chances with the Law. But he had to take both.

To Reid, there came a new significance to Buzz Maynard's grinning words—"There's money in them thar tree-tops."

"Yes, Buzz," Reid agreed; "there's money in them. . . . But as I told you before—only if you live to collect."

The Story Tellers' Circle



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You'll remember in the Circle last issue Price was telling us some sidelights on the Opium War, and the troubled seas his "China Clipper" found herself adrift in. His interesting comments continue:

"I (Ed Price speaking) *quote: 'In 1843, just after the British had forced open the gates of China for the British opium smugglers and secured for them $6,000,000 of indemnity for opium seized and destroyed by the Chinese Government, Lord Ashley offered in Parliament a resolution to the effect that the continuance of the opium monopoly and trade was utterly inconsistent with the honour and duties of a Christian kingdom.' This expression of Britain's public conscience resulted in the organization, in 1874, of the British Society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade, with Lord Shaftsbury its first president.*

"It is interesting to note that throughout its growth, the British Empire and its Imperialists have been as roundly damned and opposed at home as they were abroad: a corrective which did not exist in any of the other colonial empires. And were it not for limitations of space, I'd cite from published British statements a number of contemporary condemnations of the Opium War which in their forcefulness matched Commissioner Lin's expressions on that same subject. The history of British imperialism has many black pages—but the worst of these is a story of sweetness and light in comparison to German, Italian, and French imperialism. Not propaganda—merely a sidelight to improve our perspective on this opium war.

"Opium, in those days, wasn't regarded with the disapproval we of today have for all narcotics; poppy juice was comparatively unknown except to Asiatics. A good many reputable American trading companies in the 1840's got much of their revenue from the opium business. Some of today's wealthy families tell how great grandpappy got his start importing tea and stuff from China. Tea, and silk, and porcelain, firecrackers and cassia and lacquer and cinnabar—all that, and lots of other things. But if the entire truth had to be told, we'd hear that the old man got a juicy chunk of his fortune from opium clippers plying between Calcutta and Canton. The F. A. Delano who crops up once or twice in the dialogue

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of 'China Clipper' *is not a fictitious person; the name—does it have a familiar ring?—is often encountered in the century-old records of the opium traffic. British warships did the dirty work, sure. But American traders were trampled in the rush to capitalize on the benefits.*

"You've probably heard that in the old days, Chinese soldiers carried parasols while on campaign. Maybe, like me, you often said, 'Funny people, those cockeyed Chinese!' Well, now, maybe it is not so funny, after all.

"In describing the fighting around Canton, Commander Bingham tells, gleefully, how Sikh troops, armed with percussion muskets, shot the pants of Chinese troops who had only matchlocks: because there was a heavy rain at the time. Now, just as a guess, might not the Chinese soldiers have carried parasols so that moderate *rains wouldn't extinguish the matches they used to touch off their muskets?*

"My guess may be all wrong; but I still claim it is more reasonable than jumping at the conclusion that a Chinaman doesn't—or didn't in those days—know the difference between a battle and an afternoon on the beach.

"I've had a lot of fun, analyzing so-called outlandish Chinese customs. Nine times out of ten, I've found those customs sensible, rational, and practical, eminently suited to prevailing conditions. The Chinese use of word-symbols instead of an alphabet is not an evidence of backwardness. The fact is that after you've considered all the angles, you'll scrap the Romanized alphabetic set-up proposed as an improvement on 'picture writing,' and agree that Chinese ideograms are the only rational and practicable way for writing that language. The explanation is simple—but I'll not offer it today. If you're really interested, take a look at Sound and Symbol in Chinese, *by Karlgren.*

"Now I want to give a vote of thanks to Commander Bingham, R.N., and the opium smugglers, and the masters of tea clippers, whose memoirs suggested so many of the details of my yarn. My big regret is that I couldn't get hold of any memoirs of Commissioner Lin, a Chinese gentleman who deserved better success and more of it."

E. Hoffmann Price

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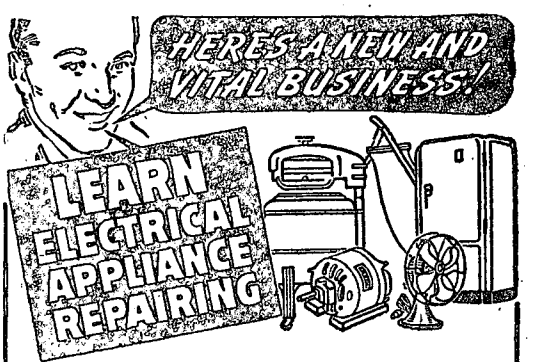

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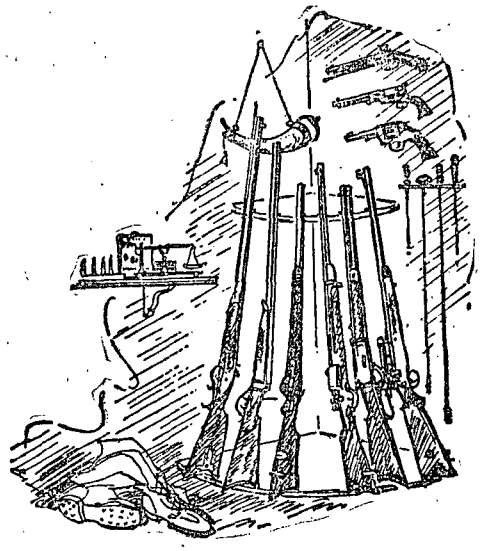

THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by
PETE KUHLHOFF

The Happy Little Pipsqueak

THE .22 Rimfire, in its various forms, is without question the most extensively used sporting rifle and pistol cartridge manufactured in the world today.

This little cartridge is used in great quantities for target shooting, small game hunting and plinking in general.

Due to this fact a great deal of time, money and energy has been expended in its perfection. For ranges up to a hundred yards, and perhaps more, it is just about as accurate as any cartridge we have. The cost of this ammunition is so ridiculously low that it is well within the means of most every American citizen.

The well-known .22 Short is the oldest of the three most popular .22 Rimfires. It is very accurate and will step right along, even

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with the .22 Long Rifle at 25 yards, or even at 50 yards. Of course, the Short for best accuracy has to be fired in a rifle that is properly chambered and rifled for it alone.

This cartridge is loaded with a bullet of 29 to 30 grains, and originally had a powder charge of three grains of black powder and a velocity of slightly less than 900 feet per second. At the present time it is loaded with smokeless powder and the bullet leaves the muzzle at around 1,000 feet per second.

The .22 Long was developed to satisfy the demand for more punch for killing small game than could be had from the Short. A longer case was produced and the 30-grain Short bullet was loaded into it ahead of a charge of 5-grains of black powder. It developed about 10% more speed than the Short (1,000 F. S.) but was less accurate.

Present day regular smokeless loads develop a bullet speed at muzzle of around 1,000 F. S. while the Winchester Super Speed load jumps the bullet up to over 1,300 F. S.

The Long is definitely inferior to the .22 Long Rifle in every way—but regardless (don't get me wrong, I can't see much point to the .22 Long) it is more accurate than the average shooter can hold.

The .22 Long Rifle cartridge is the pet of the small bore target shooter, and everyone else who wants the best as far as .22 Rimfire accuracy is concerned.

It was developed by a couple of fellows who wanted better accuracy and longer range than afforded by the Short or Long, without too much increase in the cost of the ammunition.

They (Joshua Stevens and W. M. Thomas) took the copper case of the .22 Long, with the same charge of 5-grains of black powder, and with a 40-grain lead bullet instead of the 30-grain slug proceeded to turn out a cartridge that was surprisingly accurate even out at 200 yards.

The heavier (40-grain bullet) necessitated a change in the degree of twist of the rifling in the guns made for its use. The 30-grain bullet was stabilized with a twist of one turn in about twenty-four inches. While it was found that the 40-grain bullet did best when fired through a bore with rifling making one turn in sixteen inches. Get the idea? The longer bullet required a faster spin to keep it point on—i.e., to keep

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it from keyholing or tumbling while in flight.

The original .22 Long Rifle cartridge was produced with the mouth of the case left uncrimped which was O.K. in single shot target rifles but caused quite a bit of trouble when the manufacturers of repeating rifles took it up. The bullet came out of the case too easily. If the cartridge was extracted after being seated in the chamber the bullet generally stayed in the gun; the powder spilled in the action and only the case came out. In revolvers, the bullet would move out from recoil and lock the gun. So—the manufacturers reluctantly commenced to crimp the case around the base of the bullet. They had been sure that the good accuracy had been due to the lack of crimp—but much to their surprise the crimped stuff seemed as good, if not better, than the uncrimped.

The present day .22 Long Rifle target ammo. is loaded to about 1,100 feet per second at muzzle, while the small game hollow point bullet toots along at 1,400 F. S.

Today the buyer of a .22 rifle gets his money's worth, no matter what brand or grade he decides meets his requirements.

Of course, the more dough laid out, the more gun you get. It all depends on the buyer. If a gun is wanted for killing hogs, it'd be silly to put out a hundred fish for a fine target rifle. While on the other hand, a shooter with a ten-buck gun wouldn't stand much of a chance in fast company at the targets.

Personally, I like fine guns and would want a good one, even for knocking off the festive swine.

I honestly believe that the fine .22 Rimfire rifles made today by the various manufacturers are equally good as far as accuracy is concerned.

This tackdriving accuracy is based upon a composition of small (almost microscopic)

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details all of which must be right. One rifle will do well with a certain brand of ammunition, while another rifle of the same make may prefer another brand.

When the average small bore target shooter obtains a new rifle he generally procures a small quantity of each brand of ammo. that is available and proceeds by trial to find out just which is the best in his gun.

An experience I had last October demonstrates how small details effect accuracy. I had a few boxes of prewar .22 L. R. Match ammo. which I wanted to shoot to find out if five years of storage had effected its accuracy to any extent. This particular brand had been especially accurate in a heavy barrel falling block action rifle which also had not been used for several years. I removed the heavy grease from the bore of the rifle and proceeded to shoot from rest at 100 yards. The results were not so good.

I examined the bore for rust or pits and found it in perfect condition. As a matter of fact, the bore is about the last place to look for trouble in a small bore rifle of reliable manufacture. I fired some more and still the shots were scattered up and down in an almost straight line. So I figured something was wrong in the ignition department, or the ammo. had gone bad, which I doubted. Upon examination, the firing-pin seemed O. K., and then the light dawned! I took the extractor out and sure 'nuff, a thin layer of stiff grease had gotten under it. The grease was removed and immediately the groups tightened up.

What evidently happened was this: the grease under the extractor was acting as a cushion when the firing-pin struck the rim of the cartridge, causing uneven ignition from shot to shot, thus enlarging the groups on the target.

I would advise anyone interested in .22 Rimfire shooting to obtain a copy of the Handbook on Small Bore Rifle Shooting by Colonel Townsend Whelen. This book may be had for the asking from any of the arms companies or from the Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers Institute, 103 Park Avenue, New York City.

This little handbook pictures the various .22 caliber rifles chambered for the Long Rifle cartridge, gives good dope on equipment, aiming, sights, targets, ranges, field shooting, etc.

It should be studied from cover to cover!

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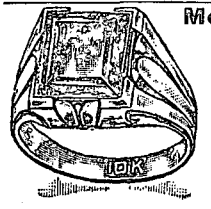
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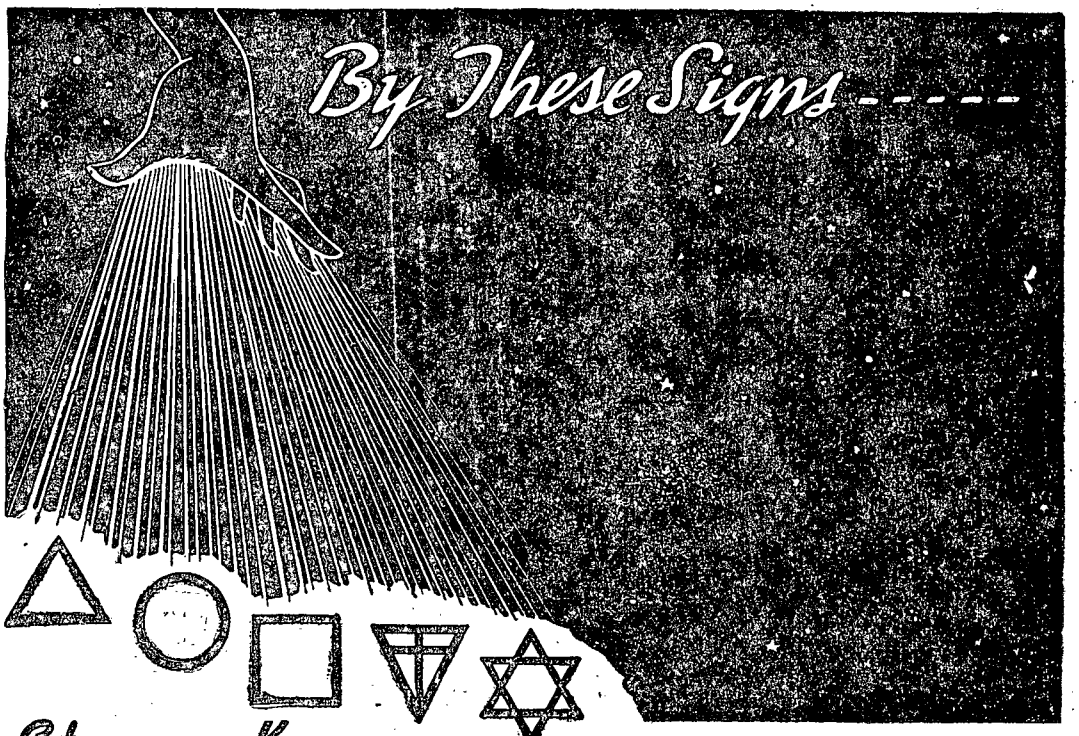

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Have you a desire, *something you wish to accomplish* in life? Put your finger on a dot. In whatever direction you move your finger from the dot, you have made a beginning. Thus a dot is the symbol of *one*—or a beginning. Your desire then is also symbolized by *one*. If you follow the *proper method* or way to accomplish what you want, you have arrived at point *two*. Whenever these two symbols are brought together—the idea and the right way—you produce point *three*—the success of your plan. Success, therefore, is symbolized by the three equal sides of a *triangle*.

In planning your personal affairs—business, domestic, or the welfare of your family—do you use a *Cosmic formula?* Do you determine whether your acts are in accord with Divine truths eternally expressed in symbols? Why does the circle represent completion? Why is it said that a man is on the square? These symbols are used by astronomers and scientists to prove the physical laws of the universe—why don't you apply them to the problems of your everyday world? Learn what symbols, as powers and forces of nature, you can simply and intelligently use in directing the course of your life.

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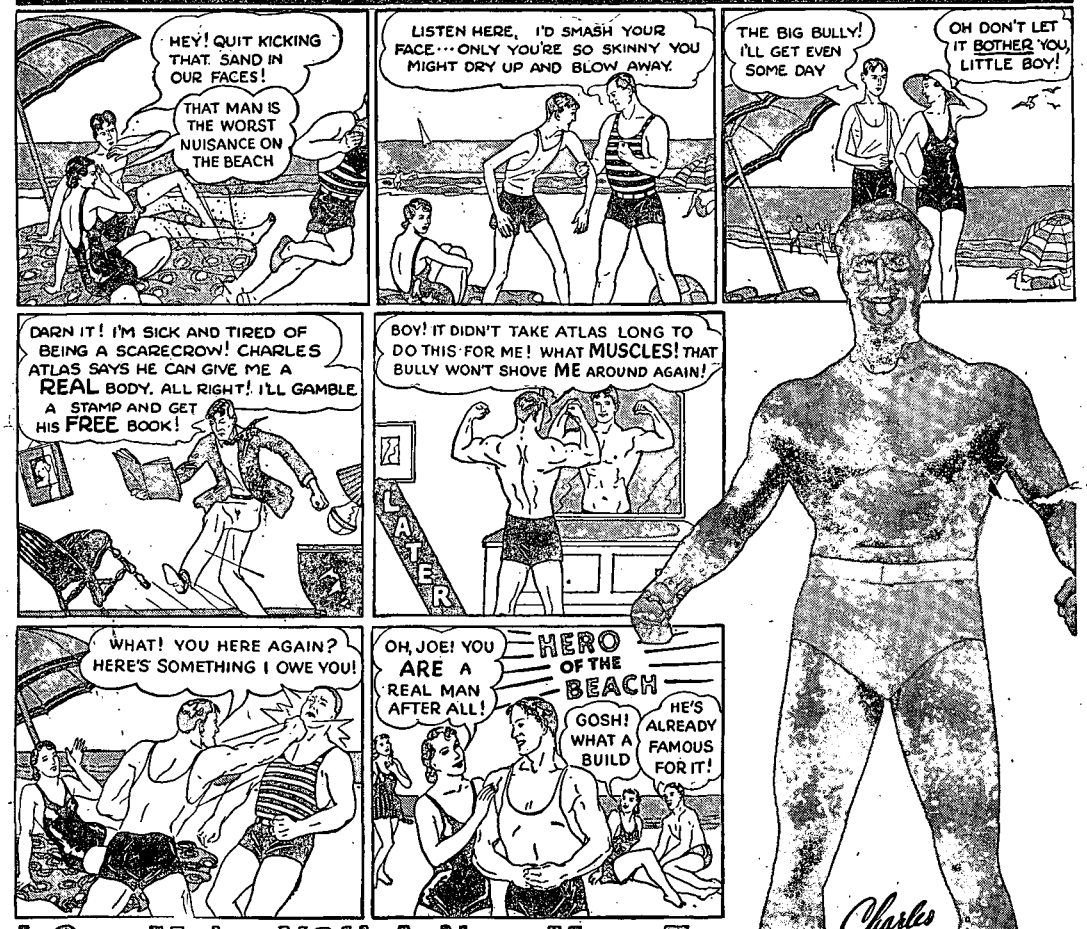
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I Can Make YOU A New Man, Too —in Only 15 Minutes a Day!

If YOU, like Joe, have a body that others can "push around"—if you're ashamed to strip for sports or a swim—then give me just 15 minutes a day! I'll PROVE you can have a body you'll be proud of, packed with red-blooded vitality! *"Dynamic Tension."* That's the secret! That's how I changed myself from a spindle-shanked, scrawny weakling to winner of the title, "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

"Dynamic Tension" Does It!

Using *"Dynamic Tension"* only 15 minutes a day, in the privacy of your own room, you quickly begin to put on muscle, increase your chest measurements, broaden your back, fill out your arms and legs. Before you know it, this easy, NATURAL method will make you a finer specimen of REAL MANHOOD than you ever dreamed you could be! You'll be a New Man!

FREE BOOK

Thousands of fellows have used my marvelous system. Read what they say—see how they looked before and after—in my book, "Everlasting Health And Strength."

Send NOW for this book—*FREE.* It tells all about *"Dynamic Tension,"* shows you actual photos of men I've turned from puny weaklings into Atlas Champions. It tells how I can do the same for YOU. Don't put it off! Address me personally: Charles Atlas, Dept. 9E, 115 East 23rd Street. New York 10, N. Y.

Charles Atlas

—actual photo of the man who holds the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 9E
115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of *"Dynamic Tension"* will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

City ..... State .....

☐ Check here if under 16 for Booklet A

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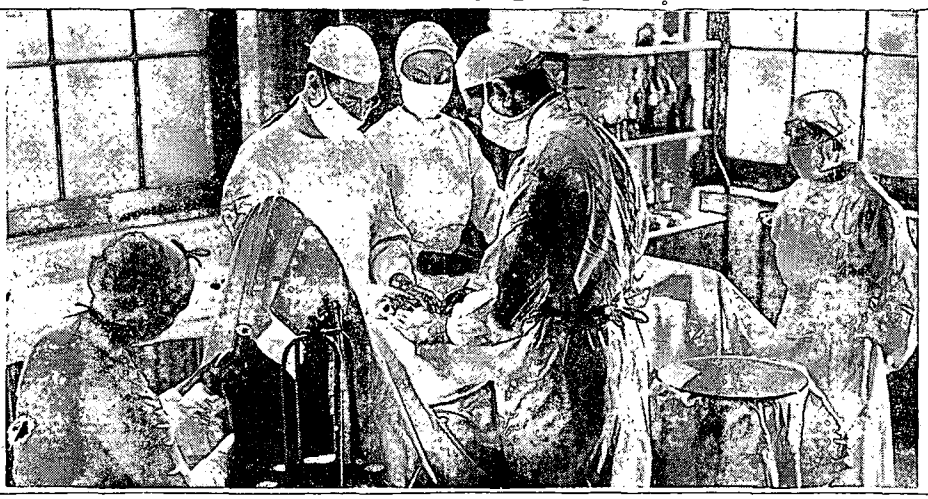
DON'T RISK PAYING HOSPITAL AND DOCTOR BILLS ALL BY YOURSELF!



HOSPITALIZATION Insurance PLAN

COVERS SICKNESS or ACCIDENT

● Do you know that an average of one person out of every ten becomes a hospital patient each year? More than 35,000 patients enter hospitals daily. You, or one of your family might be next! Don't go into debt or bankrupt your savings when Sickness or Accident strikes. Protect yourself NOW!

PAYS BENEFITS FOR ONE DAY OR MORE

This dependable Hospitalization Insurance Plan PAYS BENEFITS FOR ONE DAY OR MORE of Hospitalization for as long as 90 days for ACCIDENT and 90 days for SICKNESS in any policy year.

PAYS FOR LOSS OF INCOME DUE TO ACCIDENT

In addition to Hospital and Doctor Benefits, employed persons receive a CASH BENEFIT for LOSS OF TIME from work, while in Hospital due to accident disability, of $25 for each full week up to a total of $300.00 as provided in this liberal Policy.

ISSUED TO INDIVIDUALS or FAMILIES

You or members of your family may be protected against Hospitalization resulting from Sickness or Accident. Everyone, in good health, from 3 months to 70 years of age can apply for policy. Benefits reduced after age 60. Policy pays half benefits for Children under 18 and cost is reduced to half of the Adult premium rate.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN HOSPITAL and DOCTOR

Any lawfully operated Hospital and any Physician or Surgeon may be selected by you. You are not required to enter any particular Hospital under this liberal Hospitalization Plan.

FREE INFORMATION—NO OBLIGATION

NO RED TAPE! *Send no money — just mail the coupon.* We will mail you complete details and 10 day SPECIAL Inspection offer.

GEORGE ROGERS CLARK MUTUAL CASUALTY COMPANY

3435 Insurance Exchange Bldg. ● Rockford, Illinois

MAIL COUPON NOW

COSTS ABOUT 3¢ A DAY FOR ADULTS, 1½¢ A DAY FOR CHILDREN (Half Adult Benefits)

POLICY PAYS UP TO

$6.00 EACH DAY HOSPITAL $1080.00

Pays actual expense for Hospital up to a Maximum *Benefit of $6.00 a day for Room, Board, General Nursing* for each insured adult. Includes up to 90 days per policy year for Accident and up to 90 days per policy year for Sickness.

$25 EACH FULL WEEK LOSS of TIME $300

Due to Accident for Employed Persons, up to 12 weeks.

$3 PER VISIT DOCTOR BILLS $135.00

Maximum benefit for attendance by a Doctor up to 45 visits, while in Hospital due to injuries.

$1000.00

ACCIDENTAL LOSS OF LIFE OR BOTH EYES, HANDS OR FEET

Many other liberal benefits.

ALL INDEMNITY SUBJECT TO LIMITATIONS AND EXCLUSIONS CONTAINED IN THE POLICY

George Rogers Clark Mutual Casualty Company
3435 Insurance Exchange Bldg., Rockford, Illinois

Please mail FREE information about Hospitalization Insurance Plan Policy.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY & STATE.....
(Zone, if any)

Fill in coupon. Clip and paste to Postal Card or mail in envelope.

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